

Bus driver sacked by First Bus after suffering stroke: “You felt you were being pushed to the limit”

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Peter Arden was employed by First Bus in West Yorkshire until he was dismissed in October last year, after suffering a stroke. He was made jobless at the age of 63 after working for the company for four years.

Arden (whose name has been changed to protect against victimisation) worked at First Bus West’s Bradford interchange and was previously a private car driving instructor. He puts his stroke down to the stress bus workers have endured during the pandemic.

In early 2020, buses were designated an essential service and the union, Unite, agreed to a lengthening of the working day. New rosters saw drivers on the late shift finishing at midnight and often getting home around 1.00am. When his shift switched to “earlies” the next day, a 9.00am start would leave Arden calculating whether he should eat or go straight to bed—sometimes he didn’t sleep.

Arden experienced first-hand the company’s cavalier attitude towards safety for drivers and passengers. Drivers were told to “pile them on” during the final weekend bus service from Leeds to Bradford. They were encouraged to turn off their contact tracing app while driving.

They were expected to enforce safe passenger limits, set at 27 per bus. When passengers complained, managers would confront drivers back at the depot, saying, “you could have got another one on”. When passengers objected to those without masks getting on the bus, Arden had to explain, “I’m not a policeman, that’s not my job.”

In December 2020, 300 drivers at Arden’s depot in Bradford voted for strike action against “dangerously unsustainable” rotas, with just 50 voting against. The public was behind them, with a *Telegraph and Argus*

poll showing 60 percent support for the drivers’ action. They demanded a return to rosters they were contracted to before the pandemic. Many employers have seized on the pandemic to tear up existing contracts, including threats to “fire and rehire” staff on significantly worse pay, terms and conditions.

Unite called off the First Bus West strike in the run-up to Christmas 2020, and it was never reinstated. As far as Arden is aware, there was no resolution to the drivers’ concerns. He believes the “B graders”—newer drivers who receive lower pay—are still doing the longer shifts.

First Bus in Bradford and First Bus Leeds are currently in negotiations around a miserly 2 percent pay offer, which Arden describes as “a loaf of bread and a pint of milk.” Last time he heard, negotiations were locked in stalemate. True to form, Unite is keeping the Bradford and Leeds negotiations separate, even though services were operated together during the pandemic to mitigate driver shortages caused by infections and staff self-isolating.

In Arden’s case, the severity of the pandemic was driven home when he called an ambulance after suffering a stroke last October—paramedics told him it would be four hours before they could reach him. Luckily, a neighbour drove him to hospital.

After being hospitalised for a stroke, Arden was automatically barred from driving a bus for one year and told he would revert to B grade status on return. This is effectively a punishment for illness. As an A-grader, he had been employed on the buses at £13.00 an hour, whereas B grade drivers earn just £10.80. He worked a 37.5 hour-week, but other drivers, mainly those on lower pay, work 45 hours.

After his state sick pay ended recently (less than £100 a week) and with no other income until unemployment benefit kicks in, Arden is once again looking for work. The retirement age for men in the UK is currently 66, but it will rise to 68 by 2044.

Arden believes his stroke was triggered by the stressful daily conditions for drivers during the pandemic. If their overwhelming demands for industrial action in 2020 had not been suppressed by the union, the outcome might have been different.

Talking to an ex-workmate, Arden discovered another First Bradford driver died recently, a man younger than himself. Arden doesn't know if his death was from COVID. In 2020, two drivers, Andy Powell and Nazrul Hussain, from the same First depot at Hunslet Park in Leeds, died from COVID-19. A third driver from Leeds First died from COVID-19 a few months later, on February 17, 2021.

Arden says First Bus West is haemorrhaging drivers, piling pressure on remaining staff. Of late, eight drivers have left the company and another six are planning to leave as they are fed up.

“As to how has the company treated me”, he says, “there have been too many incidents whereby they have encouraged me to do things that were very, very unsafe and amount to absolute stupidity. They are skating on thin ice, and they are getting away with things that could go terribly wrong, due to no fault of the driver. You felt you were being pushed to the limit.

“As far as it goes with the union, I have found they have been okay on a personal basis but there is a lot of chat among the drivers that they are in league with the bosses. They favour the bosses' interest over workers, and they get paid whatever happens. As a group, the union in Bradford is supposed to be the strongest in the country. God knows what's going on elsewhere. I do worry about that.

“I think there should be strike action as the only way to make them listen because they are not listening to anything else. If you are going to fight this war you have to unify all bus workers, one hundred percent, and you are going to have to fight hard. A lot of drivers are leaving because they see the Unite union as the enemy within and are refusing to pay the £5 a week dues.”

Arden referred to London bus driver David O'Sullivan, sacked for demanding health and safety protections during the pandemic. “Dave should be

reinstated and get full back pay because he has done nothing wrong at all. What he was doing was looking out for the safety of his colleagues. The unions' collaboration is costing lives and causing mental stress. Some are leaving even though they don't have another job to go to. Why can't the companies see what's happening?”

“I think Dave O'Sullivan has been grossly mistreated. He's been putting concerns forward that affects everybody not just himself. He was kind of like, 'someone's got to do something'. He spoke out and lost his job, which I think is an absolute stab in the back. He should not have been sacked obviously, and he should have his job reinstated if that's what he wants. It shows the contempt that the bus company and the unions hold towards workers.”



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