

# Greater Manchester drivers escalate pay strike against First Bus: “It’s modernised slavery”

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More than 300 bus drivers at First Bus in Oldham, Greater Manchester are escalating their pay strike from Monday. The drivers have been in dispute since January and will stop work for three days every week until the end of February. They are demanding First Bus backdate a 4.8 percent pay raise that should have been paid from last August.

Drivers at the Oldham depot have already been on strike for six days. They will be out this week on Monday, Tuesday and Friday. On Saturday, they told the *World Socialist Web Site* about their reasons for striking, including First’s blatant attacks on working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First Bus insisted on a pay freeze last year due to the pandemic, and drivers say they have not had a real pay rise in three years. “During COVID, First didn’t lose money”, said one driver, “They got loads of government money.” Another added, “They’re still making money—there’s no excuse, we’re not asking for very much.”

This is confirmed by the company’s financial report for 2021, which shows the government’s COVID Bus Service Support Grant paid any shortfall between revenues and operation costs. First Group’s UK bus operations reported an operating profit of £36.6 million.

On back pay, one driver said that by his calculations, over the past five years drivers would have been paid an extra £3,000 if the agreed pay rises were backdated to when they should have applied.

Drivers raised additional issues with pay, including sick pay and an insultingly small weekend rate. A group discussing the strike explained that First “tried to buy our sick pay off us,” offering £1,000 in return for major cuts to the sick pay scheme. A driver commented, “They want to take away our sick pay—what happens if I get seriously ill? Cutting sick pay in return for a pay rise—they want me to pay for a pay rise out of my own pocket!” Another pointed to the health problems bus drivers commonly face from sitting down for long journeys with no access to toilet facilities.

Asked about penalty rates, a driver explained there was no prospect of anything like time-and-a-half for weekends: “We don’t even get quarter-time. We get a few extra pennies for working a weekend. We’re on £12.40 an hour on a weekday, and we only get £13.00 on a Saturday,”—this equates to a mere 5 percent extra, and a further slight increase for Sunday work.

Another driver said he had previously noticed holiday pay he was entitled to was missing from his payslip—it was only reimbursed because he had checked it carefully. He said, “If a young child gets something wrong, it’s a mistake, but a professional sitting in an HR office? How does that happen?”

Nearly every driver mentioned the roster changes forced through in early 2020. “We’re still on the emergency rosters which they brought in at the start of the pandemic,” one explained. “Before the pandemic, you could plan your year, spend time with your family.” Adding insult to injury, the emergency rosters “were on a week-to-week basis. You’d find out on the Friday when you were driving for the next week. There are people who’ve been made to work 9–10 days without a day off. It’s a little better now, we get 2–3 weeks’ notice.”

One driver described conditions as “inhuman.” “It’s modernised slavery,” he said, “I’m here at 6am, and by the time I get back home, my kids are in bed.” He told us, “We drive for five hours in the morning, without using the toilet and without a drink.”

Many of the changes have become permanent. As one driver observed, “They said they’d put the duties back, but reneged on that”, while another added, “Any work-home balance is gone. It’s corporate greed behind it. I looked at Companies House and the regional managing director took a bonus for himself.”

The Oldham depot is owned by a web of First Group subsidiaries, but the latest accounts for First Manchester confirm that two of its directors received £531,000 in

remuneration from First Group in 2020.

One driver took a leaflet about the unfair dismissal case brought by London bus driver David O’Sullivan to defend his colleague’s rights to a safe workplace. He said drivers in Oldham faced similar issues, pointing to various safety measures which were not implemented during the first few weeks. “[First Manchester] were very slow to implement COVID measures and PPE”, he said.

One driver commented, “They [management] say we’re all in it together—I’ve never seen them in early on a Saturday or Sunday! I came in at 4am and there wasn’t even a hot drink in the break room!”

Local Labour MPs Jim McMahon and Navendu Mishra joined Labour’s deputy leader Angela Rayner for a photo opportunity with striking workers Friday, but drivers were not fooled. “The MPs came down yesterday,” explained the same driver, “they don’t give a damn. They don’t live in the real world.”

Nobody had a positive word to say about Rayner, who brought her police escort to the picket line to inform workers, “Labour is here to support you and support your endeavours”, a slogan well-suited to a church raffle. A driver gave us his reply, “Where were you a few years ago? They just want to look good. The MPs had police protection—they should come drive a night shift with me, where’s my protection?”

Workers’ wary attitude toward Labour’s PR stunt was in stark contrast to the fawning response of the Socialist Workers Party whose Manchester branch tweeted a photo of the deputy Labour leader with the words, “Solidarity from @AngelaRayner at the Unite First Bus rally today in Oldham.” The SWP and similar pseudo-left groups work to uphold the crumbling authority of the Labour and trade union apparatus.

Many drivers described the hostility they face from the public as companies cut routes and preside over a decaying bus fleet, unrealistic schedules and shrinking break times. One driver said, “Here, you’re just a number. They want you to work as much as you can. You’ve got less time for your trips, the buses are always breaking down, and meal breaks are being cut. That means buses are late or cancelled, and you’re the one who gets the blame.

“You used to chat and have a laugh with your passengers, but not now. We get spat at, there’s no respect for drivers, we get called “bus wankers”. We’re working with crap and giving the public the most we can. The company isn’t run by bus people anymore, they know nothing about the bus industry, they’re just bean-counters.”

He linked cost-cutting and the poor state of buses to congestion on the roads, asking “How do you take cars off the road? You make buses warm. You make them

comfortable.” Another confirmed the aggression drivers face, saying, “I’m the public face, [management] just hide in the office, they’ve never driven a bus in their lives. We get racist abuse and get spat at.”

Drivers spoke with concern about the unsafe condition of much of the bus fleet, “If you say a bus isn’t safe, they bully you,” a driver said. If the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) inspected buses on the road, “they could take your licence away just like that. They should come to the garage and look at the buses here. I could tell you that we have sixteen buses here with the ABS [anti-lock braking system] light on. They need to get rid of the company from the franchise. It’s not safe for me and it’s not safe for the passengers.” Another driver said, “I think that rather than franchising, it should be under council control.”

Many drivers expressed a cautious optimism for the strike, with one commenting, “In the beginning Unite let the company have a bit too much. I think they are looking out for our interests now.” But every driver who followed the 11-week strike at Manchester Go North West agreed the workers there had been sold out. Unite rammed through a company deal imposing more than £1 million in cuts and a 12-month pay-freeze. Workers at Go North West later denounced the deal as a “sellout”, while Unite’s general secretary Sharon Graham still holds it up as a “victory”.

No faith should be placed in Unite. The WSWS urges First Manchester workers to carefully review the lessons of the Go North West strike and the long list of betrayed strikes and below-inflation pay agreements enforced by the union over the past 12-months. New organisations of struggle are needed that will challenge the subordination of workers’ lives and vital transport services to the profit interests of company shareholders. Drivers at Oldham should form their own rank-and-file strike committee to end Unite’s isolation of their dispute and expand the fight for better pay and conditions across the bus industry.

We invite drivers to contact the WSWS with any information, comments or feedback.



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