

First Bus Greater Manchester drivers speak about their strike: “It’s not just about the pay... they did a rewrite of our conditions”

Our reporters
1 February 2022

Drivers on the picket line at First Bus in Oldham spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters this week about their industrial action. They have been in dispute since January and are striking for three days every week until the end of February.

The workers are paid just £12.40 an hour for a skilled, highly responsible and stressful job. The company has refused to honour the start-date for a pay increase that was due in August 2021.

Joe and his colleague Tim (their names have been changed to protect against victimisation) explained the background to the dispute, including pay-related issues and the tearing up of conditions during the pandemic.

Joe described driving when the pandemic began:

“In Manchester at 11 or 12 o’clock on a Friday or Saturday night the buses are normally nuts, but we were driving them into Piccadilly [bus station in Manchester] and it was empty, like a scene from the apocalypse. It was the weirdest thing ever.

“The company said you can’t refuse anyone travel if they refuse to wear a face mask. That was at a scary time and people were dying. We were worried.

“The company weren’t thinking about service, they were thinking about money. That’s all they were interested in. The buses weren’t being cleaned or sanitised. I don’t care what they said about ‘We couldn’t get sanitiser, we couldn’t get anti-bacterial wipes’. Well go get a bottle of bleach then and a bucket of water and scrub the buses!”

Tim said, “I drove to a depot in Huddersfield and there was someone at the depot cleaning all the buses. We only had that after about a year, but not when it really mattered.”

Joe recalled, “Do you remember at the time, the TV

pictures in China? They were showing people dead. We thought ‘f**k me’”.

Tim agreed saying, “There were pictures from Italy showing people in hospital with it and they couldn’t breathe. And here we were, there wasn’t a single car on the road and I’m there driving an empty bus. For what reason?”

There had been infections at the Oldham garage during the pandemic, with a driver seriously ill in intensive care for several weeks. Luckily no-one in the depot died.

Joe described the unhygienic conditions drivers had confronted:

“I would get into a bus in the morning, and it hadn’t been sanitised from the night before. Tim might be taking over from me. He is then getting into the cab and driving, and nothing was sanitised. We had no masks and no gloves. It was horrendous.”

Tim agreed, “We had to be 2 metres distanced in the depot, but I was taking over from his bus! He’s been touching everything. He’s been sitting there for four hours, and the buses hadn’t been cleaned. Eventually, they had protections in, but that was 12 months later. It was bad.

“There was no PPE, face masks didn’t come in for several months. Honestly, in the pandemic I was really scared, thinking I’m coming out here risking my life, and what if I take it home to my wife and kid? Everyone was thinking that.”

In London, more than 70 bus workers have died from COVID-19. WSWs reporters informed the striking drivers about the campaign by London bus driver David O’Sullivan who was sacked for asserting his right to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the

Employment Rights Act. The drivers said they would find out more about O’Sullivan’s case.

Joe said, “Transport has the second highest mortality rate from COVID in any industry. This all goes back to why we are striking. The company was saying ‘We need your help’. And it was always on the promise that we would get back any conditions we lost. They said, ‘We don’t want to be sacking people. We want to work with the furlough scheme’, etc.

“Even though people were upset about it, we went along with it because of the reduced passenger numbers. Unite [the union] pretty much went along with it.

“But now the company are saying drivers haven’t lost any conditions in the pandemic—that they are still the same. That’s a lie.

“We used to have a long weekend a month. We used to work three Saturdays in a four-week period, and you’d work one Sunday in a four-week period. And then you would have a long weekend off every month. It was not ideal, but you still had more Sundays off. That’s all gone now, they took it away. You’ll get one weekend off every six weeks now.

“You used to be able to plan weekends and go out with the wife and kids. You could say ‘I’m working Sunday so we can go out Saturday’. They took it away straight away. They had been trying to get rid of those shifts for a while and the union wouldn’t let them do it, and the pandemic gave them the opportunity.

“We had what is called STA days where the rota guaranteed six days of work a week. You have got in your rota five days and then a STA day which is your sixth day. That is all gone. There were guys who were on early rotas, guys who have worked there for years on permanent earlies and no weekend work for them. That’s all gone. People who were earning an extra £70 to £100 a quid a week with STA have had it all cut.

“As soon as we went into the pandemic and everyone went into lockdown, they did a rewrite of conditions and it all changed.

“The strike is not just about the issue of pay. It’s probably the worst job I’ve ever had with the stress. It is just horrendous. The other thing with this place is that management are always on you.”

The drivers at Oldham were aware of the 11-week dispute last year by bus drivers at Go North West in nearby Manchester. Unite claimed the strike ended in

victory based on the withdrawal of company threats to fire and rehire staff, but these were only lifted because Unite agreed to more than £1 million in cuts. Joe said, “Yeah, it’s at the expense of something else.”

He explained, “Here, the company are now offering us something, but it’s at the expense of sick pay. They are offering us £13.50 an hour, which is a lot more than what we are getting, but with no back-pay from last August. They will only do back-pay from November. We have said we will go back for £13.10 an hour and full back pay and our rotas back. That’s not unreasonable. It would put us on par with Go North West.”

Referring to the £1,500 one-off payment Go North West drivers got as part of their deal, Joe said, “These one-off payments look good on paper, £500, £1,000, £1,500, but it’s at the expense of something else. They tried it here before Christmas offering us £500 but we said ‘No way’, as it would be at the expense of something else and we’d be worse off.”

Tim said, “Why should we give something back? They owe us. We don’t owe them anything.”

We invite First drivers and drivers at other firms to contact the WSWS with any information, comments or feedback.



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