

Vote “No” to First Manchester/Unite pay offer: No more concessions! Build a rank-and-file strike committee!

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The *World Socialist Web Site* urges bus drivers at First’s Oldham depot to reject the sell-out pay deal cooked up between Unite and First Manchester. Voting on the deal begins today and ends on Tuesday.

Unite suspended strikes last Thursday based on what it claimed was an “improved offer” from First. But drivers have reacted angrily, telling WSWs reporters the deal is merely a “recycled” company offer that does nothing to address their concerns.

“I won’t be voting for it, it’s just not good enough”, a driver explained Friday, “not after what we went through with the pandemic”. The drivers are paid just £12.40 an hour and saw their conditions torn up during the pandemic, including the imposition of new rosters that have cut pay and destroyed family life.

The drivers launched rolling strikes January 10, shutting down services for two days each week. They voted to escalate their action from January 31, with three one-day stoppages each week during February.

Unite officials repeatedly sought to end the dispute. During talks with management January 7, the union tried to call off strike action based on an undisclosed pay offer. This was torpedoed by First’s refusal to backdate the pay claim, amounting to hundreds of pounds.

The strike at Oldham, Greater Manchester, is part of a growing wave of industrial action as workers across multiple sectors counter rampant inflation and decades of wage suppression imposed via sweetheart union-company deals. Similar strikes and wildcat actions have erupted across Europe, the United States and Asia.

Unite suspended strikes at Oldham on the same day that Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey demanded pay restraint to curb inflation, “We do need

to see a moderation of wage rises. Now that’s painful... But we need to see that.” No similar demands for “restraint” have been made of the corporations and pandemic billionaires whose fortunes have skyrocketed.

Unite’s deal at Oldham shows they are the Number 1 firefighters for the employers against workers. They have sold out dozens of recent strikes, enforcing below-inflation pay-deals (cynically packaged as “victories”) at Manchester Metrolink, Stagecoach Preston and Chorley, Stagecoach Greater Manchester and Arriva North West in Liverpool.

In recent weeks, bus drivers in London, Sheffield, Barnsley, Rotherham, Bradford, Bristol and Swindon have been (or are still) in dispute over pay. But Unite has worked to isolate them and prevent a united campaign for genuine cost-of-living increases and to end what drivers describe as “modern slavery”.

Unite’s role in promoting Labour MPs on the picket line helped lay the ground for the present sell-out pay deal. Sir Keir Starmer’s Deputy Angela Rayner was given red carpet treatment by Unite, her empty pledges of “solidarity” promoted by the capitalist media and by pseudo-left groups like the Socialist Workers Party. This is the same Labour Party in de facto coalition with Boris Johnson’s “let the bodies pile high” government of austerity and mass deaths.

In unilaterally calling off strikes last Thursday, Unite regional officer Dave Roberts spoke of a “spirit of goodwill... From the beginning of this dispute, Unite has made clear that it believed it could be resolved through negotiations. Once First Manchester returned to the negotiating table with an improved offer progress was made.”

No details of Unite’s new pay deal have been made

public. Drivers say they have seen a summary of its “highlights”, but are yet to see the fine print.

A driver told WSWs, “I’m voting no. No-one knows what that are voting for. It’s the bits in between that we’re not being told. The pay seems okay, but they want to take off our sick pay. We’ve been offered £13.10 an hour and it’s supposed to go up to £13.50 in October.”

While Unite offers its “goodwill” to the company, there is zero for the workforce. On the critical issue of full backpay since last August, the driver explained, “They’re offering a cash sum, not back pay.”

He added, “The rosters are not going back to normal. I’ve been losing £80 a week since they changed to new rosters over COVID.”

Another driver praised last week’s WSWs article on the strike, especially its interviews with drivers about the impact of the pandemic. “That’s a good article. I worked at Diamond [a bus company owned by Rotalla plc] and two of my friends died of COVID.”

Even some of those who planned to vote for Unite’s pay deal were doing so with no enthusiasm. One worker said, “we’re so used to having money taken off us, if we get anything it looks good.”

Roberts, who now offers First Manchester the union’s “goodwill”, played a central role in the sell-out at Go North West in Manchester. A determined 11-week strike last year by 400 drivers against “fire and rehire” contracts ended with Unite delivering cuts to jobs, terms and conditions. Roberts had appealed to the company to not abandon talks, declaring, “there’s well over a million pounds in savings being offered on the table and a commitment to work with the company to make further changes.”

First bus workers in Oldham began their struggle just as Unite was betraying all-out strike action by 560 Stagecoach Yorkshire bus workers based on a below inflation agreement. Falsely packaged as a 10.7 percent “huge” increase, it is a two-year agreement and maintains the same pay gap between garages which the joint strike action was fighting to overturn.

The Oldham strike was called off just hours before Unite announced that more than 300 bus drivers employed by First West Yorkshire in Bradford had voted to strike by a majority of 77 percent, following their rejection of a pay offer of 1.9 percent from October 2021 and a further 1.8 percent for the year

from October 2022.

Despite General Secretary Sharon Graham describing the First West Yorkshire pay offer as “truly pathetic” and “out of touch with reality”, Unite declared it will do nothing for 12 days. It will then enter “a new round of talks” with the company on February 16. Drivers who spoke with WSWs reporters in Bradford said the real pay claim should be 20 percent, as called for by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

According to internal briefing documents prepared by Unite, the rate of inflation for workers last May was already 9.8 percent. Unite’s pay-deals fall well below that. This is in keeping with its corporatist and pro-capitalist agenda that workers must forego wage increases to “save the economy”, i.e., profits.

Workers at First Manchester should reject the proposed deal and take their struggle out of the hands of Unite by electing a rank-and-file strike committee to expand their fight. This must begin with an appeal for the broadest possible support from workers throughout the bus and transport industry who are facing the same ruthless attacks from transport corporations and their shareholders. The fight for a living wage must be combined with a wider struggle against the criminal response by the entire ruling elite to the pandemic.

To discuss the fightback and formation of a rank-and-file committee, we urge drivers to contact the WSWs today.

We invite First Manchester drivers to contact the WSWs with information, comments or feedback regarding the proposed deal.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact