

# Unite secures sell-out pay deal to end strikes at First Bus Manchester

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The Unite union ended strike action by 300 First Manchester bus drivers Wednesday, pushing through a below-inflation pay deal that helps set a new benchmark for worsening conditions for drivers throughout the industry.

Drivers at First's Oldham depot had struck for eight days over January and February for better pay, as anger mounted over the tearing up of conditions by the company during the pandemic.

Strikes were suspended by Unite on February 3, in what it described as a "goodwill" gesture to the billion-pound transport conglomerate and following a deal it cooked up with First.

Despite many workers expressing opposition to the deal, and more than a quarter voting it down, the deal passed by 70 percent. This was the result of substantial pressure and propaganda from Unite.

At no stage did Unite mobilise any of its thousands of members throughout the First group in support of the Oldham drivers. It called off the strike just as drivers at First West Yorkshire voted to strike over the same low pay rates.

In the lead-up to the ballot, Unite described the deal with First as an "improved offer". After it was endorsed by members it suddenly became a "vastly improved pay offer". Unite has claimed its deal "will see pay rates increase by 8.9 percent. In addition to the increase in basic pay the drivers will see all other payments increase by the same percentage and they will also receive a one-off payment of £750."

Speaking to the WSWS as they voted, workers said the pay increase was around 6 percent according to their calculations. This is a real-terms pay cut—with Unite citing the Retail Price Index measure of inflation which stands at 7.5 percent and rising.

Workers had demanded that any pay deal be

backdated to last August. Unite had previously described the company's opposition to this as a "sticking point" and its capitulation on the issue will cost many workers hundreds of pounds and set a precedent for future pay deals.

The company also refused to fully restore service rosters changed at the start of the pandemic. The roster alterations, endorsed by Unite, ended drivers having one long weekend per month off work. Other drivers with seniority worked permanent early shifts, with no weekend work. This was taken away, as was a rota guaranteeing some staff six days work per week.

The WSWS called for a "no" vote ahead of balloting and reported workers condemning the deal. A driver with over 20 years' experience who voted down the deal told the WSWS, "We should be getting all the back pay that we've lost. But what this is all about is what they've done to our rosters.

"I'm losing my rosters, but they are willing to pay us £750 in a lump sum. For a driver who is on 38 hours a week, there's a 70p pay rise. If you times that by 28 weeks it comes to £744 pound so they are just willing to pay back pay for 28 weeks, which was due from August until now. But for people like me and others who do overtime, around 50 hours a week, we should be getting back pay from August until now of over £1,000 pounds. We're only getting £750.

"We are losing. I was on a roster where I never had to work past 8.00pm. Now I'm having to work nights."

Another who voted for the deal said he understood why a substantial section of drivers voted against. He explained that Oldham has lost 100 drivers since the pandemic, because conditions imposed by First were so bad. "A lot left because we got put on stupid conditions. We've also dropped some services and cut down our running time and are not running as many

services.

“The trouble is that the 100 people who have left weren’t service roster based, so now we’ve got 100 drivers who were on service and they are only putting about 60 of them on service based rosters. There are just not the service-based places available on the rosters now.”

Regarding the £750 lump sum, the same driver said that only those who worked basic stipulated weekly hours had not lost income. Those regularly working overtime had lost out, some by hundreds of pounds. “If you do the basic hours and then another shift on top, you will lose about £150 out of this deal. A few drivers who do a lot of overtime have lost a lot more.

“Realistically, this pay deal means nothing compared to what we’ve already lost. The fact that they have screwed us over in the pandemic with the furlough scheme is much bigger than this. Under furlough, we were paid 80 percent of our basic wages. But the law states that on our terms and conditions, and on our shifts, that we were supposed to get *80 percent of average earnings*, which obviously adds up on the basis of all the overtime you have done and stuff like that. But First didn’t do that. They paid us on our basic pay. I lost around £3,000 being furloughed for five months.”

Another said, “They [First Manchester] put it in black and white before lockdown that they’d restore the rosters. They’ve restored some, but not all. It doesn’t affect me, but that’s why I voted no.”

A driver who voted no said, “The deal is the same as before, they owe us six months back pay.”

Another who rejected the deal referenced the devastating cost of living crisis slashing workers’ incomes, “The union said we can’t get a better deal, but things will hit the fan come April, when everything goes up.”

A driver told us he had not worked at First long enough to be on a service roster, but still voted no because the deal attacked the conditions of fellow drivers.

As with Unite’s sellout of drivers at Go North West in Manchester last year, the union bureaucracy has relied on its pseudo-left apologists to promote its deal to the workforce.

Unite announced Wednesday that its deal had been accepted, but the results were first made public one day earlier by Ian Allinson, a local Unite bureaucrat who is

a member of RS21, a splinter from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He has become Unite’s resident specialist in sugar-coating filthy sell-outs.

In his role as Manchester Trades Union Council “industrial action solidarity coordinator”, Allinson sent an e-mail bulletin reporting, “Unite First Bus Oldham Strike Settled”. He wrote, “Unite members have voted by 72% [Unite said it was 70 percent] to accept an improved pay settlement worth over 9% [Unite said it was 8.9 percent], lasting until April 2023, and including substantial back pay.” Breathlessly, he continued, “This is considerably more than they were being offered before they went on strike—indeed it is more than the union had originally asked for.”

Even Unite leader Sharon Graham, who Allinson and his pseudo-left colleagues portray as the Second Coming, was content with merely declaring of the First Manchester deal that it was a “substantial pay rise.”

For its part, the WSWs provided a platform for First Bus drivers at Oldham to speak out and oppose Unite’s collusion with the company. Our intervention drew upon the experience of Go North West drivers’ 11-week strike, and major strike battles in the United States that have seen workers form independent rank-and-file strike committees to lead a fightback against company-union sweetheart deals.

As workers enter into battle, it is essential to review the lessons from last year’s wave of strikes and the role of the corporatist, pro-company trade unions in suppressing and betraying these struggles. The situation demands the building of rank-and-file committees throughout the working class to prepare for mass industrial and political action against the ruling elite and its servants in the trade union bureaucracy. This is the perspective being fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.

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



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**