

Striking UK First Manchester bus drivers: Unite union “try and split us, but we’ve all stuck together so they can’t push us around”

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Around 360 bus drivers working for First Manchester at its depot in Oldham, England have thrown out the company’s latest pay offer and plan to continue strike action into August.

Services across 18 routes in Greater Manchester connecting Oldham, Rochdale, Ashton, Salford and Manchester are affected.

The Unite members initially walked out for 48 hours on July 3, with further strikes on July 7, 10, 11 and 13 and action planned from July 21 to 25, and July 28. The union announced further stoppages on August 2, 4, 7, 10 and 11 if “First Manchester does not put forward an improved pay offer.”

According to the *Manchester Evening News*, the company’s latest offer is for 15.2 percent. The rise, however, would not be fully backdated to April but paid in three instalments: from April, in October and next January. Because the Stagecoach bus company won the franchise and is due to take the service over, workers fear the offer will be covering two years. A further issue is pay parity. First Manchester bus drivers are paid £1 an hour less than drivers in other bus companies.

Other issues include lack of toilet facilities, which can result in chronic health problems, and excessively long hours, as drivers cover for staff shortages. The company cannot attract drivers due to the poor pay.

On its website, Unite wrote, “While the current offer would bring the drivers’ pay into line [with other companies], the difference in wages is expected to increase as other bus operators implement their wage increases.”

First Manchester is a subsidiary of the multinational First Bus, which runs the UK’s second-largest bus

operation as well as its largest rail operation, owning Avanti West Coast, Great Western Railway, Hull Trains, London Tramlink and Lumo, and with a 70 percent stake in South Western Railway. The company also operates in Ireland.

First Group’s 2022 annual report showed operating profits increased that year by more than £6 million to £226.8 million. Its annual report 2023 notes a “Strong financial performance...The Group adjusted attributable profit [to shareholders] more than doubled, to £82.1 m ahead of expectations (Fiscal Year 2022: £36.2 m)”.

Unite regional officer Colin Hayden said, “The company has been told repeatedly that their drivers will not accept a split pay deal when it is abundantly clear First is making millions in profits.”

Workers must be warned that their struggles cannot be left in the hands of the union bureaucracy. In 2021, Unite negotiated a sellout deal at Go North West in Manchester after an indefinite strike lasting 11 weeks, accepting attacks on sick pay and a de facto pay cut. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham ensured the dispute remained isolated, advancing a strategy of leverage and futile appeals to the goodwill of shareholders.

Hayden was a union rep at the garage at the time, who took redundancy money when the dispute ended. He was rewarded for pushing through the deal with his present position as Unite regional officer.

In February 2022, Unite also pushed through a below-inflation pay deal at First Manchester after eight days of stoppages, isolating the dispute to the Oldham depot just as drivers in Unite at First West Yorkshire took a vote to walk out. Unite refuses to unify the bus drivers’ disputes within and across bus companies, siding with

the companies to ram through substandard deals.

Neither were pre-pandemic work rosters restored, another demand of the Oldham workers, accepting encroachments on family time.

When asked by World Socialist Web Site reporters why he was striking, a First Manchester driver said, “It’s the same [issue] as last time. The shareholders got big bonuses.”

Another driver said, “We’re at the bottom of all the bus companies and feel as if we’re banging our heads against a brick wall. We want more money, we want £16 an hour, everything’s going up except wages. We were offered [initially] a two-part deal, 3 percent on each one. There’s been a landslide to reject every offer.

“I’ve been here for 20 years, so I don’t do any lates, but that was scrapped [during the pandemic] and I’m having to do lates and split shifts.”

Asked about the role of Unite in relation to the below-inflation pay deal to end the previous strike, he said he suspected the union were “taking backhanders. I used to be a union rep, I know what happens, you are offered nice, cushy jobs. They are going into meetings and not telling us what’s going on. They try and split us, but we’ve all stuck together so they can’t push us around.”

One driver explained he was against the current disaggregated strikes because if drivers in all the companies were united and “were all out for 48 hours, we would have got what we wanted.”

A driver who began working at the depot in 1993 when it was publicly owned said, “It’s got worse since it was privatised. It’s not an easy job, it’s stressful, and we should be paid a reasonable amount.”

Sarah has worked for the company for five years. She said, “We pay more tax and insurance, mortgages are going up and the cost of living is going through the roof. [After the last strike] we are back to square one.

“They offered us a pay rise in two stages, then they offered three stages which worked out less. In March, when Stagecoach take over, we’re not really getting a pay rise because we’re stuck on that for two years.

“There should be a national strike against the government. They’re making millions, and they’re not putting into the workers who are making the wealth. They are too money oriented. There wouldn’t be billionaires if it wasn’t for the little people.”

A driver of seven years who has four children explained, “Everything’s gone up 60 percent. Milk

used to be £1.10, now it’s £1.80, but I’m on the same wage. I work seven days on 12-hour shifts just to pay the bills—and I’m left with minus £250 every week.

“Last year, the company made £6.6 million in profit just in our depot. The company gave First’s director a £1.9 million pay rise, 200 percent, but they can’t give us 13 percent. We’re after £16 an hour backdated to April, but they say they don’t have the money. Everyone else got bonuses but drivers don’t get a pay rise. We’re on £13.50 an hour here, but most of the companies pay £15, £16 an hour.

“I start work at 7am and finish at 7pm, sometimes 9. There’s a financial crisis at home, it’s very difficult. The cost of living is going up, wages should go up. All the big companies made profits over COVID. The government is investing in things we don’t need, like going to war. We’re in a war here with our circumstances.”

For this fight to go forward, lessons must be learned about the treacherous role of the corporatist, pro-company trade unions.

In the UK, postal workers have taken a lead in forming a rank-and-file committee, to take their struggle with Royal Mail out of the hands of the union tops.

Bus workers in London have also waged a determined campaign to build the influence of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and expose and oppose Unite’s sellouts of their struggles.

We invite First Manchester drivers to write to us with information, comments or feedback.



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