

Bus drivers at three Greater Manchester companies to take four days of strike action

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More than 2,000 Greater Manchester bus drivers at three different private operators have voted to take co-ordinated strike action between September 19–22. They rejected insulting pay offers. Further strike action has been confirmed from September 30 to October 2.

The members of the Unite union work for bus companies who rank among the largest and most profitable in the UK—Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus. The planned walkout will shut down two-thirds of the Greater Manchester network. This itself shows the operational grip of the private operators functioning collectively under the “Bee Network”, the franchised public transport system including the Metrolink tram/light rail service overseen by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM). This is controlled by the 10 councils in the combined authority and led by Labour Mayor Andy Burnham.

At Stagecoach, 1,000 drivers across Oldham, Stockport and Middleton depots rejected a 3.5 percent offer. Another 1,000 drivers at Metroline Manchester threw out the same deal at Sharston, Hyde Road, Ashton and Wythenshawe depots. At First Bus in Rochdale, 110 turned down a 6 percent offer, as they are the lowest paid bus drivers in the region, on £15 an hour.

FirstGroup’s operating profit for last year was £204 million and share dividends were increased by 45 percent on the previous year. Stagecoach reported pre-operating profits of £51 million for last year, up from £33 million the year before. Metroline’s parent company, Singapore-based ComfortDelGro, recorded a £60 million operating profit from its UK and European bus operations in the first half of 2025—boosted by new Greater Manchester contracts worth £422 million over five years.

This profit gouging exposes the companies’ claims that even a cost-of-living pay rise for bus drivers is unaffordable.

Unite’s leadership under Sharon Graham has not set

down any demand for a substantial rise and equal pay for equal work. Instead, it issues polite appeals for a “return to the negotiating table with an improved offer,” leaving the bus companies free to dictate terms and Unite to package any minimal concessions as the “best possible offer.”

The fight for a genuine pay rise and parity is not only a fight against the profiteers of Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus, but also against the Labour authority and its entrenched relations with the private operators.

Burnham has called for the strike to be averted and for a “fair resolution,” only to insist that any deal must reflect the fact that the country and region “are not awash with money.”

In 2023, Greater Manchester became the first English region outside London to introduce bus franchising since Margaret Thatcher’s deregulation in 1986. This has been promoted as bringing bus services back under “public control,” but franchising is a managed form of privatisation: fares, timetables and routes are set by the local authority, while the buses remain in private hands. Operators continue to undercut one another in the bidding process, driving down pay and conditions to guarantee shareholder returns.

Unite makes no call to end the carve-up of the network by the private operators. Instead, it seeks a place within Labour’s pro-business franchising agenda with the major corporations. Graham “blasted” the UK Bus Summit held in Manchester on September 11 for excluding “workers’ voices.” This was a gathering of Burnham, Labour ministers, regional mayors and executives including representatives of First Bus and Arriva, dedicated to assuring the profits of private operators in a further roll-out of franchising across England and Wales. Graham stated, “Unite must automatically be involved in any discussions around franchising.”

Graham, elected Unite general secretary in August 2021

with the vote of just 4 percent of the members, amid widespread abstention, was hailed by pseudo-left groups as the “workers’ candidate.” Her “victory” at Go North West buses in Manchester in May that year was held up by Unite officials as proof of the success of her “leverage” strategy of limited industrial action combined with appeals to shareholders and other means of securing a favourable compromise with the corporations.

In fact, the policy of fire and rehire was withdrawn after an 11-week strike by 400 drivers at the Cheetham Hill depot only because the union bureaucracy gave the company everything it wanted: job losses, unpaid meal breaks, reductions in sick pay and a longer working day, including compulsory overtime.

It is this corporatist alliance which has been pursued by Graham over the last four years to prevent co-ordinated action across the privatised bus network, isolating strikes and ending them on marginally improved offers, often below-inflation, painted as victories. Her pro-forma denunciations of corporate “greed” have been combined with tightening the control of the apparatus to rein in workers resistance.

At Stagecoach West Scotland in June, after nine days of an all-out strike by 430 of the lowest-paid bus drivers in the UK, Unite abruptly suspended the action before workers had even seen the company’s revised offer, let alone voted on it. The deal fell short of the drivers’ demand for £15 an hour, granting only £14 while imposing immediate cuts to conditions such as shorter meal breaks and reduced signing-on/off times. Unite withdrew strike pay and drivers were threatened with depot closures to force acceptance.

While Unite is boasting of “co-ordinated action” in Greater Manchester, it continues its isolation tactics nationally to stymie and block a unified struggle of bus workers. From September 29 to October 5 and again October 13 to 19, 500 Stagecoach drivers in Birkenhead, Chorley and Preston are set to strike over pay disparities. Over 800 Arriva drivers, engineers and cleaners across five depots in Luton, Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Ware and Hemel Hempstead are striking for 16 days on September 23-26, and three staggered stoppages in October, rejecting a 65p per hour pay offer. 600 First West of England bus drivers in Bristol began strike action from this Tuesday to Friday after Unite suspended earlier action between September 4-8 to put a “full and final” offer from the company to a vote, which was rejected. An earlier two-year derisory deal based on an extra £1 an hour from now to March 26 and an hourly increase of 30

pence from April 2026 had already been voted down.

At Greater Manchester Metrolink tram and light rail service Unite is also using delaying tactics over a ballot for industrial action by its 200 members. Workers employed in ticketing, passenger assistance and information services already rejected a 3.2 percent offer from the private consortium Keolis/Amey which operates the system, but the ballot does not close until October 1.

Greater Manchester bus drivers at Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus must establish a joint strike committee to take control of the dispute. They should demand complete oversight over further pay negotiations and not allow Unite officials to suspend the action prior to proper scrutiny of any revised offer at mass meetings before a vote is taken.

The strike committee can be the platform for reaching out to thousands of their colleagues, not just on the buses but at Metrolink to wage a unified fight against the private operators. The wealth of these billionaire corporations must be expropriated to fund a public transport system under workers’ control.

They must also reject appeals directed by Unite to Andy Burnham. References to the Labour Mayor and Deputy Labour Party leadership candidate and Manchester Central MP Lucy Powell as a “soft left” opposition to Keir Starmer glorify an effort to rescue a widely hated government from oblivion.

Burnham has set up an initiative with other Labour MP’s called “Mainstream” and is reported to be lining up as an alternative leader to Starmer. He pays lip service to lifting certain welfare cuts such as the punitive two-child benefits cap. But his message to bus drivers that Manchester “is not awash with money” is a de facto pledge to uphold Labour’s pro-business and pro-war agenda.



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