

Doncaster bus drivers at First South Yorkshire strike for pay parity

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Bus drivers in Doncaster employed by First South Yorkshire began strike action on March 28, with a further four 24 hour stoppages planned for March 30, April 7, 22, and 24. Drivers rejected almost unanimously a 7 percent pay offer backdated to January.

The 230 Unite union members are determined to overcome regional disparities in pay, and a deal failing to give them parity with their First Bus colleagues in Sheffield, just 18 miles away. Their determination is underlined by their selection of strike days over the Easter holiday, with the first day disrupting the seasonal opener at Doncaster Racecourse.

First South Yorkshire operates routes from the city centre to the towns and former coal mining villages which satellite Doncaster but are separated by large distances. Managing director for the South Yorkshire region, Zoe Hands, said the company “recognised the strength of feeling” among drivers, while claiming that the offer was “among the best driver pay deals this year.”

The company is doing all it can to silence discussion among drivers regarding the offer. WSWS reporters attempted to speak to drivers in the days leading up to the strike about the issues in the dispute. In response, First management sent all drivers a message commanding them: “On no account should you discuss company business with the media.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, “It is completely nonsensical that drivers in Doncaster, who do the same job as their counterparts in Sheffield and work for the same company, are being paid less.” She noted, “First is a highly profitable company and can more than afford pay parity for our Doncaster-based members.”

FirstGroup is highly profitable, but those high margins are due in large part to the poverty wage settlements Unite has helped impose on the workforce over more than a decade. The First Bus arm of FirstGroup alone saw its operating profit rise to £42.7 million in the last six-month

report. The company insists their margins are tight, citing inflation and rising energy costs, even though they have already hedged 88 percent of their fuel for 2027.

FirstGroup’s new international figures, released March 26, saw their operating profit for the first half of the 2026 financial year rise to £103.6 million. Total FirstGroup revenue is predicted to exceed £1.4 billion for the full year, and the company has been consistently returning cash to shareholders, completing a £50 million share buyback programme in late 2025 and increasing dividend payments by roughly 30 percent year-on-year.

Sheffield drivers currently earn approximately £238 more per month in gross pay than their counterparts in Doncaster. Sheffield drivers earn £31,000 per year on an hourly rate of £15.30, rising to £15.60 on April 1. However, this equates to take-home pay after deductions of less than £26,000. By comparison, Doncaster drivers earn just £28,600, with an hourly rate of £14.15—just over £24,000 a year after deductions. Trainee drivers earn even less. In Sheffield they receive £14.00 per hour, while in Doncaster they receive £12.58—just 37p above the national minimum wage.

The national median salary is almost £40,000, but the Yorkshire and Humber median is just £34,800, so South Yorkshire drivers fall well short of even that.

The strike comes at a pivotal moment for public transport in South Yorkshire and nationally. In October last year, a Bus Services Act was passed by the Labour government lifted the ban on councils setting up their own bus companies. On March 26, the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) announced a “franchise” model—a hybrid public-private design—for the region’s major bus depots, including Doncaster Leger Way. This is not, as touted in some quarters, a return to nationalised public transport and certainly not to the comprehensive network of routes, regular buses, and cheap fares of the old municipal South Yorkshire

Transport.

The new franchise model—South Yorkshire People’s Network—is set to begin in Doncaster during September 2027, and drivers are seeking pay parity in advance of the new franchised contracts being drawn up.

Under this set-up, bus companies will still bid for contracts to run a cluster of routes but will no longer generate profits in association with how many passengers and the price of passenger tickets. Instead, they will be paid a fixed fee to run the service. Corporate profit will continue to be generated from the margin between the size of the government subsidy and how little they can pay drivers. The bus companies will seek to extract even more profits from drivers’ labour, on the basis that setting passenger fares will no longer be dictated by the bus companies.

Such exploitation is especially true for FirstGroup, as the corporation has sold off almost all its North American assets, including Greyhound and First Student buses, and is now almost exclusively located in the UK and Ireland. First Bus runs approximately 20 percent of the bus journeys outside London and is expanding into the capital by acquiring RATP London bus operations and winning the contract to run the London Overground starting in May. They run rail services including First Rail, Avanti West Coast, and Great Western Railway, and “Open Access” services like Lumo and Hull Trains. FirstGroup’s national operations are, however, vulnerable to even larger global corporations operating in the public transport market—necessitating maximising their sole source of profits in the UK market.

Unite lobbied for an end to the “failed experiment” of bus deregulation and has officially welcomed the shift to the franchising model. The union claims, in alliance with Labour Party-run mayors such as Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, that franchising will end “profiteering.” But franchising does not represent “public control” but a form of managed privatisation with the privately owned bus companies still determining pay, terms, and conditions.

Drivers in Doncaster should look to Unite’s sellout of drivers employed under the franchised bus network in Greater Manchester last year. The drivers employed at three companies operating under the license of Transport for Greater Manchester—Metroline, Stagecoach, and First—were seeking to reverse decades of declining pay and fragmented conditions since privatisation.

As the WSWs reported, a joint struggle of the drivers was sabotaged by Unite officials who “entered repeated

backroom talks with company executives—brokered by Burnham—to chip away at the unified struggle. The revised deals imposed on a company-by-company basis meant no parity on pay for First Bus drivers with other Greater Manchester bus drivers, and settlements at Metroline and Stagecoach barely dented inflation.”

Achieving wage parity in Doncaster must be fought for on the basis of a struggle by all the company’s drivers to increase pay as the cost-of-living crisis intensifies. It requires drawing up non-negotiable strike demands: a shorter working week with no loss of pay, acceptable shift patterns, the abolition of two-tier contracts, and mass hiring to end chronic shortages. These are not perks but the minimum needed for safe public transport and decent wages.

The leadership of the strike must be wrested from the Unite bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file committees in every depot. Such workers’ bodies will open negotiations to oversight, put an end to backroom deals, and Unite’s frequently used tactic of suspending strikes at the last minute on the pretext of responding to a supposedly “improved” offer from the company.

A unified fight by drivers throughout South Yorkshire would counteract attempts by Unite to call off or restrict strike action, as they negotiate sellout local deals, and prevent coordination across depots, companies, and regions.

Rank-and-file control will enable Doncaster drivers to contact those at First in Sheffield, and other depots in major urban conurbations where the company runs services—as well as workers at other operators fighting back against attacks on pay and conditions. The defence of jobs and services requires opposing franchise deals and demanding public ownership of transport under democratic workers’ control.



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