

# Doncaster bus drivers at First South Yorkshire extend strike over pay parity

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Over 230 bus drivers at First South Yorkshire in Doncaster have added two additional strike days next week, intensifying a dispute centred on pay inequality and worsening conditions across the network.

The members of Unite have overwhelmingly rejected the company's pay offer because it fails to deliver parity with colleagues performing identical work in Sheffield—just 18 miles away. The dispute has become a focus of opposition to a tiers system in which drivers doing the same job are divided by location over pay rates and conditions.

The new strike dates are April 14 and 17, adding to previously announced stoppages on April 22 and 24. Earlier action on March 28 and 30 and April 7 caused major disruption across Doncaster and surrounding areas, despite management's strike-breaking operation.

Unite confirmed the new strikes dates in a press release on April 8, describing it as an “escalation”. However, the statement made no reference to the aggressive measures of First South Yorkshire aimed at isolating and intimidating workers at the Leger Way depot. These include a ban on workers speaking to the media under threat of disciplinary action, as well as reducing payments to deter drivers from taking part in the action.

One striking driver, speaking anonymously to the *Doncaster Free Press*, described the company's strike breaking operation in detail: “First has suspended all overtime and late payments to try to force the drivers back to work instead of striking. The management is running buses on strike days, and they are getting paid their normal wage plus an overtime wage, and a £50 bonus for working strike days. If they are not from around Doncaster, they are getting put up in a hotel with breakfast and evening meal paid for, as well as hired minibuses to bring them to and from Doncaster.”

Zoe Hands, Managing Director of First Bus Manchester, Midlands & South Yorkshire, confirmed that “We have volunteers supporting our Doncaster operations and this has meant covering certain costs to enable them to live and work away from home, in addition to extended working hours.”

Drivers emphasise that the dispute is not only about pay, but about dignity and equality. In an open letter cited in the local press, one driver wrote of “a tale of two cities. If you drive a bus in Sheffield for First, you are paid £15.30 per hour (rising to £15.60 in April). If you drive that same bus, doing the same difficult job, on the streets of Doncaster, you are paid just £14.15 per hour.”

The company's gagging order preventing workers from speaking to the media has not been publicly opposed by Unite, allowing management to silence workers and limit their ability to appeal for broader solidarity.

First South Yorkshire is not treating the dispute as a local issue. It is mobilising resources across its network, recognising that the conditions being challenged in Doncaster exist throughout the industry. Bus workers in Doncaster, Sheffield and across the UK are paid below the median wage and face falling real wages, worsening conditions and long hours. This is rooted in decades of privatisation and restructuring carried out with the cooperation of successive governments and trade union leaderships.

As the WSWS reported FirstGroup, parent company of First South Yorkshire, reported a 30 percent rise in revenue to £833.6 million for the half year ending September 2025. Its First Bus division recorded operating profits of £42.7 million over the same period. Despite this, the company claims that margins are under pressure due to inflation and energy costs, even though it has hedged most of its fuel costs in advance. First Group is the largest transport provider in the UK, operating 20 percent of bus journeys outside of London and runs many rail services with a combined workforce of over 30,000 in the UK and Ireland.

The strike takes place amid wider restructuring of bus services across England. The Labour government's Bus Services Act has opened the way for a new franchising model under which private operators continue to run services under contract. In South Yorkshire, the Mayoral Combined Authority is proposing a hybrid public-private system branded as the “South Yorkshire People's

Network,” scheduled to begin in Doncaster in 2027.

Far from reversing privatisation, this model entrenches it by guaranteeing operators fixed payments that secure private profit. Profit is no longer derived primarily from fares, but from the margin between the payments operators receive to run franchised services and their expenditure on wages, staffing levels, and the maintenance of vehicles and depots.

Unite has welcomed the franchising model, echoing Labour’s claim that it will curb profiteering. Experience elsewhere demonstrates that such claims are misleading.

Doncaster drivers should take note of Unite’s sellout deals last year in Greater Manchester under the new arrangements for franchising. Around 2,000 drivers employed by Metroline, Stagecoach and First, operating under Transport for Greater Manchester contracts, entered coordinated strike action seeking to reverse decades of declining pay and fragmented conditions.

Initially, the dispute developed into a unified movement across operators, with coordinated strikes in September showing the potential for a powerful challenge to the entire franchising model. However, after just four days of industrial action, Unite intervened to break the emerging unity.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and local officials entered negotiations with company management, brokered by Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham. Unite split negotiations company by company, isolating workers and weakening their collective leverage.

The resulting agreements, pushed through in October, entrenched existing divisions. First Bus drivers remained without parity with other operators, while deals at Metroline and Stagecoach delivered pay increases that barely kept pace with inflation. The central demand for unified pay and conditions across the network was abandoned.

This was made possible by the absence of independent rank-and-file organisation capable of challenging the union apparatus and enforcing democratic control by workers to achieve their aims.

The same methods—division, secrecy and isolation—are being deployed again in Doncaster. Without independent organisation, there is a real danger that the struggle will be contained and broken up.

## The way forward

A genuine escalation of the dispute cannot remain confined to a single depot. The demand for pay parity raises the need for a coordinated struggle across depots, companies

and regions.

By setting up a rank-and-file committee, Doncaster drivers can conduct such a struggle.

This requires clear, non-negotiable demands: full pay parity across all depots; a shorter working week with no loss of pay; predictable shift patterns; abolition of tier contracts; and mass recruitment to address chronic understaffing. These are basic requirements for safe, reliable public transport and decent conditions.

Such a struggle cannot be left to a union apparatus that has tolerated gagging orders, intimidation, and repeatedly isolated disputes. Leadership must be taken into the hands of democratically elected rank-and-file committees.

These committees must ensure full transparency and control over negotiations. No backroom deals and no agreement should be accepted without full workforce approval.

Workers must demand must be the removal of the gagging order, to assert their right to speak openly to each other, to other workers, and to the public. This is essential to break isolation and spread the dispute.

Rank-and-file committees would enable coordination across First depots in South Yorkshire, linking workers across the wider FirstGroup network and with drivers at Stagecoach, Arriva and others facing similar attacks.

FirstGroup is already operating nationally, shifting drivers and resources to break strikes. Workers must respond with coordinated action across depots and companies. This would be a challenge to the franchising framework.

The fight for pay parity is inseparable from opposition to a system subordinating transport to corporate profit. The alternative is genuine public ownership under democratic working class control.

The Doncaster strike shows the determination to resist inequality. By breaking the gagging order, forming rank-and-file committees, and uniting across depots, bus workers can transform their struggle into a broader movement for public transport in the interests of workers and passengers alike.



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