

Unite cancels May Day strike by Doncaster bus drivers to meet with management

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30 April 2026

The Unite trade union, representing 230 Doncaster First Bus drivers striking for pay parity with drivers in nearby Sheffield, has agreed to suspend industrial action. This so union officials can meet with management under the remit of the arbitration service, Acas.

After initially escalating the dispute at the Leger Way depot, Unite officials are now seeking to shut it down through closed-door talks with First.

After eight days of strike action since March 28, Unite confirmed further stoppages for April 27 and 29 and May 1. However, on Tuesday the union announced that the May Day walkout was cancelled.

Regional officer Christian Ratcliffe declared: “The employer has agreed to a meeting with Unite and Acas. Therefore, we have suspended strike action this Friday for negotiations,” adding that further action on May 6 depends on the talks.

The cancellation of action set for international workers’ day by the union speaks volumes.

The May Day strike would have provided a platform to appeal beyond their depot—to bus workers and the wider working class.

First has resorted to strike-breaking operations and used a gagging clause in drivers’ contracts to deny them the right to speak publicly. Unite has not opposed these methods. Instead, it tells workers not to broaden their struggle but to place faith in the officials accommodating the company’s suppression of wages and rights.

Acas is not neutral; it serves as a state mechanism for union-management collusion to shut down militant struggles.

Doncaster drivers, as Unite members, are aware of the 15-month strike by Birmingham bin workers—against a Labour authority which has mounted a £34 million strike-breaking operation backed by a Labour government. This aims to cut pay by up to £8,000, downgrade roles and reduce crew sizes by a quarter.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has diverted this struggle into the Acas framework, isolating opposition to

£300 million in cuts while blocking solidarity across Unite’s membership in favour of a “leverage” strategy to bring the council back to negotiations. A settlement being finalised with Birmingham council—based on lump sums of £16,000—would cement the loss of safety-critical jobs and earnings workers struck to defend.

The shutdown of May Day action must be seen alongside the secret talks Unite officials staged with Reform UK over reaching a similar sellout agreement were the far-right party to win control of Birmingham council from Labour in the May 7 local elections.

Bus drivers in Doncaster, bin workers in Birmingham, and other workers in struggle are not engaged in isolated disputes but confront the attacks of the corporate and financial elite—and are part of an international struggle.

No solidarity action is organised by the trade unions because they are dominated by an apparatus acting as an arm of government and corporations—demobilising the class struggle and opposing any effort to unite workers across sectors and national borders. Ending this isolation requires workers establishing democratic structures under the control of the rank-and-file.

Warning signs of a sellout are evident, with Unite officials entering talks when First has not offered a single penny after drivers rejected a 7 percent pay offer backdated to January. First drivers in Doncaster earn £14.15 an hour, compared to Sheffield drivers £15.30 (rising to only £15.60 last month). Trainees receive much less). Such disparities between depots and regions are used to suppress wages across the sector, which remain below the national median.

First Bus managing director for Manchester, Midlands and South Yorkshire, Zoe Hands declared, “We are ready to enter talks to seek a resolution and are pleased Unite has agreed to pause industrial action to enable negotiations to take place.”

Hands wrote to drivers stating: “The principle for you is you want parity with colleagues at another depot, who you used to be collectively bargained with, and the principle for us is that parity can be achieved, only it can’t be done in a

single backdated step.”

The letter makes clear that even if an incremental improvement was offered, it would still deny drivers’ core demand; and reveals First’s concern that this message was not getting through.

Hands expressed outrage at drivers’ sentiments that they were being held hostage by a profitable company, writing, “I hear things like “First Bus can afford it”. She countered “we exist to do good and we have to make money to exist.”

Such do-gooding has exclusively favoured the shareholders, with £76 million over the last year shelled out in dividends and buy backs at FirstGroup (the parent company of First South Yorkshire). FirstGroup 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. FirstGroup is the largest transport provider in the UK, operating 20 percent of bus journeys outside London and running many rail services, with a workforce of over 30,000 across the UK and Ireland.

To assist the government in its managed form of privatisation, Unite has tried to subdue opposition by promoting illusions in its new franchising model, selling it as a return to “public ownership.”

The letter underscores that franchising offers no solution to pay erosion: “We are a year and a half away from franchising,” writes Hands, “and I’ve tried many times to explain to your Union reps that getting everything you want in one go now was the worst possible timing as you are in the most uncertain period of your future.”

The Doncaster strike takes place amid wider restructuring of bus services across England, making it crucial for First to establish a low benchmark for wage increases.

The government’s Bus Services Act enables franchising, under which private operators run services under contract while councils set routes, timetables and fares. In South Yorkshire, the Mayoral Combined Authority proposes a hybrid “South Yorkshire People’s Network,” scheduled to begin in Doncaster in 2027.

The model guarantees fixed payments to private operators while limiting flexibility on costs, making profits increasingly dependent on the margin between subsidy and spending on wages, stock and infrastructure.

This underlies Hands’ warning: “Each additional day of disruption places further financial strain on any ability we have to offer a better deal, it negatively affects your pensions and holiday accruals, creates uncertainty about the long-term security of the depot, and damages confidence the public have in bus travel.”

The central concern of First and other operators is to prevent a unified fightback that could challenge the privatisation model—relying on Unite’s isolation tactics and

its alignment with the government.

The WSWS has urged drivers to form a rank-and-file committee, warning the struggle cannot be entrusted to Unite officials.

- 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.

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

- Workers must demand the removal of the gagging order, to assert their right to speak openly to each other, to other workers, and to the public.

- 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 operating nationally, shifting drivers and resources to break strikes. Workers must respond with coordinated action across depots and companies.

- The fight for pay parity is inseparable from opposition to a system subordinating transport to corporate profit, as does the franchise model. The alternative is genuine public ownership under democratic working-class control.



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