

# Unite ends Doncaster drivers' strike at First Bus based on revised pay offer

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Unite announced May 28 that First South Yorkshire drivers in Doncaster, England have accepted a revised pay offer following a ballot of 230 members at the Leger Way depot.

First Bus drivers took eight days of strike action beginning in March, demanding pay parity with colleagues just 18 miles away in Sheffield, along with improvements to sick pay and annual leave arrangements.

The full agreement has not been published. Unite's press release states that top-rate drivers will see their hourly pay rise from £14.15 to £15.60 immediately, followed by an increase to £16.10 on August 31. An £850 one-off payment will be made to all drivers, and the company has committed to matching any percentage pay increase awarded to Sheffield drivers by April next year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Unite's news desk, which confirmed that pay parity has been secured across all grades, including new starters. Long-serving drivers have won an additional day's annual leave after five years of service. The parity agreement is due to remain in force until April 2028.

Drivers at the Leger Way depot almost unanimously rejected management's 7 percent offer—which would have further entrenched pay disparities with Sheffield—and mounted two days of strike action in March, escalating to six days in April. The strike caused major disruption across Doncaster and surrounding areas despite the company's strike-breaking operation.

Management suspended overtime and bonus arrangements, drafted in replacement labour from other regions, accommodated strike-breakers in hotels and paid inducements to keep services running. Striking bus drivers maintained large picket lines at the garage and won local support.

That First South Yorkshire was ultimately forced to retreat from its insistence that the 7 percent offer was “final” was due to the determination and unity of the

drivers.

However, drivers should critically review Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham's account: “This is another brilliant win for Unite members, who stood firm together in their fight for fairer pay. It was by taking industrial action that they were able to improve their pay significantly.

“It proves there is power in a union.”

The reality is that the intervention by Graham and Unite officials was aimed at closing down the strike before it broke out of the confines of a single garage. Graham did nothing to mobilise opposition against First Bus's strike-breaking. Instead, Unite worked to bring the dispute under control through closed-door negotiations.

After additional strike dates were announced for April 24, 27 and May 1, Unite officials abruptly cancelled the May Day walkout to attend talks with company representatives at the arbitration service ACAS.

The cancellation of the strike on International Workers' Day speaks volumes. It would have become a focal point for appealing for support from transport workers far and wide and workers more generally facing the same onslaught on pay and conditions.

The ACAS talks were conducted in secrecy in keeping with its remit of fostering company and union co-operation to stamp out action. This secrecy was maintained throughout the month-long ballot on the revised deal. Drivers reported being warned that speaking publicly about the proposed settlement could result in disciplinary action or dismissal. Unite officials told the WSWs this was in accordance with company policy, accepting the gagging order and refusing to disclose basic information about the contents of the proposed settlement or even the date when the ballot would close.

In tying the settlement to parity with Sheffield drivers, nothing was done to redress the disparity between bus drivers' pay and the median wage across the region.

Sheffield drivers' pay is roughly £31,000 per year, equating to take-home pay of less than £26,000. 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 turn to arbitration and the suspension of strike action at Leger Way depot was to prevent the stand taken by Doncaster bus drivers from igniting a broader struggle. First South Yorkshire has made clear its appreciation for Unite's role. Zoe Hands, Managing Director of First Bus's Manchester, Midlands and South Yorkshire operations, welcomed the suspension of industrial action and acceptance of the revised offer because it provided "certainty" for the company and allowed everyone to "move forward together."

First has every reason to be grateful for the services of Unite officials. FirstGroup—the parent company of First Bus—saw its 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.

Achieving this level of profit requires the union bureaucracy to police a restive workforce of 30,000 across the UK and Ireland employed by the largest transport provider in the UK operating 20 percent of bus journeys outside of London and many rail services.

The demobilisation of the Doncaster strike follows the same pattern seen in Unite's sellout of the Greater Manchester bus drivers' dispute at the end of last year. Stagecoach, Metroline and First drivers entered a joint struggle for improved pay across the Bee Network franchise system operated under Labour's Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham. They took four days of strike action together in September, but after that Graham and Unite officials intervened through a series of backroom negotiations with Burnham and the private operators to shut down the joint strike action.

The revised offers were used to make agreements on a garage and company basis. This began with First Bus drivers accepting an improved offer based on a deal which did not meet the criteria for parity for the lowest-paid drivers in the region. It ended with the Metroline and Stagecoach disputes being shut down after further walkouts based on marginally improved offers, well short of what continued collective action could have won.

Graham has tied Unite ever more closely to Labour's

new bus franchising agenda in England. This is falsely promoted as a return to public ownership, as Burnham has mis-sold this in relation to the Bee Network in Manchester. Franchising leaves services in private hands while enabling local authorities to cut public transport funding by continuing to tender to the lowest bidder for routes.

Under the Starmer government's Bus Services Act for England, councils set routes and fares while private companies continue to run services for profit on a fixed fee. In South Yorkshire, the proposed "South Yorkshire People's Network" is based on this model and is scheduled to begin operating in Doncaster from 2027. Operators compete for contracts while workers face pressure on pay, staffing levels and working conditions. Profits depend increasingly on reducing labour costs and maximising the margin between public subsidy and operational expenditure on pay, stock and infrastructure.

The fight for pay parity therefore cannot be separated from a broader struggle against a transport system organised around private profit.

Drivers should draw the necessary conclusions: the pay gains secured through industrial action are welcome, but the level of collusion established by Unite with First South Yorkshire on the terms acceptable to the company mean the concessions won can be clawed back via cost-cutting measures. The renewed partnership between Unite and First has been cemented through the isolation of drivers at Leger Way and restraints against their independent organisation.

The fight against low pay and improvement in working conditions requires a new strategy. Bus workers must build rank-and-file committees independent of the Unite bureaucracy, democratically controlled by workers to overcome every sectional division. Only through organisations independent of the union apparatus can workers unite across depots and regions in a common fight against private operators and the franchising system that protects them. The alternative is not managed privatisation but genuine public ownership of transport under the democratic control of the working class, organised to meet social need rather than private profit.



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