

First says campaign won't derail firm's plans

By Andrew Hebden
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Transport giant FirstGroup last night vowed to stand firm in the face of an increasingly bitter trade union campaign as it lodged its bid for a major rail franchise.

The Aberdeen-based company has become the target of a multimillion-dollar action funded by the American Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and backed by the Transport and General Workers' Union in the UK.

Yesterday the unions stepped up their efforts with the launch of a dossier savaging the company for its service standards, reliability and treatment of workers. It was being handed out to MPs and ministers at the Labour Party conference in Brighton.

The document was launched to coincide with FirstGroup's submission of its bid for the new Greater Western franchise, which includes Thames Valley commuter services, local services in the West Country, and fast trains linking London Paddington with Wales and the south-west. It incorporates two existing franchises which FirstGroup already runs and the Wessex Trains franchise.

FirstGroup will be going head-to-head with Perth-based Stagecoach, which is bidding as Brunel Trains, and National Express for the new franchise.

Last night a FirstGroup spokesman lambasted the unions and said their campaign would only damage the company and, ultimately, its workers and their members.

He said the campaign was being organised by the SEIU, using a budget of more than £8million, to boost its membership at First's US subsidiary First Student, which runs yellow school buses. This summer, a delegation from the US staged a protest at FirstGroup's annual meeting in Aberdeen.

The spokesman said: "The reality is that the whole campaign is nothing to do with standards. It is a very aggressive campaign which they have pledged to continue until we sign away the rights of our staff in the United States to a secret ballot on trade union membership."

The dossier criticises the company for its record both in the UK and overseas and concludes: "As FirstGroup has become the largest surface transportation company in the UK - generating substantial shareholder returns in doing so - it has all too often left a legacy of declining service standards and rising prices, frustrated passengers, communities, and regulators, and poor employment practices."

But the FirstGroup spokesman said it had a good history of relations with trade unions, including being among the first to have an employee representative on its board, and said it had improved performance dramatically on the existing Great Western franchise. He added: "We are very proud of our record and our staff and are very disappointed by this unpleasant campaign."

Meanwhile, the company faced disruption closer to home as workers in east and central Scotland said they would stage a strike from Monday to Sunday next week after their latest industrial action failed to settle a pay dispute.

It follows a 48-hour strike which started on Sunday morning and two 24-hour stoppages earlier this month in the pay row which has seen the T&G demand drivers are paid £8 an hour, backdated to the start of this year and without any conditions attached.

Bosses have said they are willing to pay drivers the requested sum, but the pay rise will be connected to pensions.

The threat of industrial action remained a possibility in Aberdeen, too, where members had rejected a further slightly improved offer, T&G regional organiser Thomas Campbell said yesterday. He added: "The matter is still unresolved and the union is keen to negotiate a settlement that is acceptable to our members, otherwise there is the potential for a strike."

A spokesman for FirstGroup said the firm was committed to finding a solution to the issue through dialogue.