

US unions step up battle against First's yellow bus expansion

By Barrie Clement
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Union leaders warned yesterday they will fight FirstGroup's plans for expanding its yellow school bus subsidiary in the US 'contract by contract'.

In a significant escalation of its campaign against the transport company, the US-based Service Employees International Union (SEIU) said it would ensure decision makers would be told about its 'abysmal' record.

Andy Stern, the international president of the union, said First was 'not fit' to be award public service contracts because of its record on safety, reliability and punctuality and its treatment of employees in the US. The union has been fighting FirstGroup's bid to take over the enlarged Greater Western rail franchise in the UK.

Mr Stern admitted his organisation was spending 'hundreds of thousands of dollars' on the campaign and would be prepared to spend more until the company entered talks. But he insisted his union was spending less than FirstGroup, which was employing 'expensive lawyers' as part of its attempt to keep unions out of the company.

'It's not a responsible contractor and it doesn't deserve to be awarded public funds,' Mr Stern said. 'We want American parents to know the kind of company they are being asked to entrust their children to. We are going to take the campaign to another level.'

He said the SEIU would prefer to enter a 'partnership' with FirstStudent, the group's US subsidiary, so that competition between yellow bus companies would centre on efficiency, the quality of its management and safety, rather than which employer could pay the least.

He conceded that his union's membership at FirstStudent was 'very limited' but argued that was because of the company's 'anti-union' attitude. Union agreements at FirstStudent existed only where US businesses had been taken over by the company, he said.

A spokesman for FirstGroup said the American union's campaign " in alliance with the Teamsters' union in the US and the Transport and General Workers' Union in Britain " was an attempt to win negotiating rights above the heads of employees. 'They want us to sign away the rights of our staff who have so far chosen not to be members of the SEIU. Our employees represent a lot of potential revenue for the union. That's what it's all about and that's why they are trying to bully us.'

He said 20 per cent of FirstStudent's workforce were members of unions and that where the SEIU was recognised, management negotiated with its officials. He said the group had a 'very good safety record' in the US.

The spokesman also claimed the SEIU was ignoring the normal procedures for winning recognition. FirstGroup dealt with 13 unions including the Teamsters which had the most members at FirstStudent, he said.

The SEIU campaign has incurred the displeasure of some UK unions which say constant attacks on companies undermine their ability to create employment.