

South Yorkshire Freedom Riders - who we are, how we started

In 2006 a national bus pass scheme was introduced for the elderly. Anyone over 60 could use a bus between 9.30am and 11pm for free. This was a recognition that Britain has one of the lowest pension schemes in Europe and that encouraging elderly people to get out and about would be good for their health (decreasing stress on the NHS).

Local areas were allowed to add on extra concessions which many did.

South Yorkshire extended the concessions to run from 9am all day and also allowed free train travel on trains in South Yorkshire and into West Yorkshire. They also gave this concession to disabled pass holders.

Early in 2014 it was discovered the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive were planning to end all extra concessions from the end of March. Barnsley Retirees Action Group, a small pensioners group, leafleted the bus and train stations for a week to build a meeting at Barnsley library. On March 1st over 300 people turned up. We had to have two separate meetings to fit everyone in!

The meeting agreed to fight the travel concession cuts. A follow up meeting on 27th March had a vigorous debate about how to campaign. Holding Freedom Rides, refusing to pay on the trains, was put forward. Some people were concerned about legal consequences of this but after a lengthy debate a large majority voted to do this.

The first Freedom Rides

The first day of cuts was Monday March 31st. About 60 people turned up to Barnsley train station to find a large number of British Transport Police and Northern Rail management waiting for us. A Northern Rail manager quickly reassured us that there was no problem. They were there to ensure our safety. We did explain that we had been boarding trains safely for many years but it was nice of them to look after us. He went on to say that there had been confusion about when the cuts were starting so Northern Rail had decided that this was a discretionary day – it was up to our discretion as to whether or not we paid.

We gave a loud cheer and piled on to a train to Meadowhall where we met supporters from other parts of South Yorkshire and held a rally.

There was a good discussion of tactics and it was voted to carry on Freedom Rides on a weekly basis. The idea was not to get individuals to confront train guards on their own but instead to have mass weekly protests.

The following week an even larger group of us turned up at Barnsley station to find no police, just a Northern Rail manager who helped to make sure that our Freedom Ride took place with no problems. That week a train driver in ASLEF gave us contact details for Tosh MacDonald, ASLEF national vice president who has attended a number of our Freedom Rides and given great support to us.

The third week saw the same thing happen again with our numbers swelling.

Northern Rail change

When we turned up for our fourth Freedom Ride we found a barrier of British Transport police and were told that we would have to pay for Freedom Rides from now on. We argued that we were FREEdom riding not PAYdom riding. After a long argument we were told that we could travel this week but it would be the last time.

On the 28th April we turned up to find a solid police barrier and despite our arguments we were not allowed onto the platform to catch our train. Rather than give up we went over the bridge to the north bound platform and caught the first train that came along. There was a wonderful moment as we waited for the train to pull away, holding up our placards in the windows. We were waving at the line of police on the other platform who seemed bemused that we had got onto a train so easily.

The following week there was a ring of police all round Barnsley station. The footbridge from the bus interchange was blocked as well as every entrance into the station. We had a noisy protest, gave ourselves a great cheer and resolved to carry on.

During all these protests we had regular open planning meetings. Every meeting and protest rally encouraged anyone who had ideas to put them forward. These included lobbying the Transport Committee, lobbying council meetings, lobbying the Transport Executive offices. We always voted on our tactics and abided by the majority decisions. People who had never been involved in demonstrations in their lives before suddenly felt empowered. This meant that even when we were stopped from getting on trains we were able to hold large protest rallies to publicise our campaign.

Partial Victory

On 9th May the Transport Executive announced that they were making a u-turn. They completely reintroduced free train travel in South and West Yorkshire for any disabled pass holders at any time of the day. They were also bringing in half price train travel in South Yorkshire for the elderly pass holders.

On Saturday 17th May a victory march went through Barnsley with over 200 on it. The rally at the end welcomed the partial turn around but voted to carry on fighting to get a full return of our concessions.

Following this a number of rallies took place. We enjoyed a lot of support from the public generally including those who were quite young. We also enjoyed support from various unions. The local Unite Community branch were particularly supportive, supporting our rallies, helping produce leaflets and placards. Organiser Joe Rollin spoke at a number of our demonstrations and was warmly received.

New idea

On 9th June someone suggested as we were demonstrating outside the station that if we bought a ticket for one stop we could over-ride to Meadowhall and so manage a Freedom Ride of sorts. It was agreed to do this.

The police were confused again as we all bought a cheap ticket and boarded the train. They got on as well and when we got to Meadowhall they all went to block the platform going back to Barnsley. We had our rally and decided that as our return platform was blocked off we would get a train to

Sheffield instead and ride back from there. As our train set off to Sheffield we gave a friendly wave again to the police. We all travelled free to Sheffield and back to Barnsley.

A fortnight later we tried to do the same. Unknown to us the BTP had made plans to carry out arrests. We travelled through to Sheffield station where the police and extra ticket inspectors kettled us on the platform. We held a rally on the platform using a megaphone so that all other rail users would know what was going on and why we were protesting.

After about half an hour the police launched a violent attack and arrested two Freedom Riders who were bailed to appear in court on 7th July. On that date 150 protesters turned up to support the two arrested. The lobby was followed by a march through Sheffield down to the station and a Freedom Ride back to Barnsley.

Unite the union came to the support of the two as both were Unite Community members. Free legal aid was provided as well as help with demonstrations and leaflets.

A week before the court case was due to take place with 17 prosecution witnesses and three sets of prosecution video evidence the CPS announced that all charges were being dropped. They were obviously worried about their witness statements describing the protesters as "A bunch of wild dogs." One witness claimed he was more frightened than he had been when facing football hooligans or EDL demonstrations. Yet all our video evidence showed a peaceful civil disobedience protest until the police attacked us.

Dropping the charges caused great celebrations – another victory to the Freedom Riders. The planned protest rally outside the court was turned into a victory rally with another march through Sheffield and another Freedom Ride.

What followed?

Since the Sheffield station incident people have been too nervous to take part in direct action with Freedom Rides. We are still approaching the Passenger Transport Executive and the rail company to pursue more concessions.

We have launched a national petition calling for free local train travel across the whole country pointing out that this is available to the elderly who live in London, Merseyside, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands. It can be signed online at <http://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/free-local-train-travel-for-england-s-pensioners-3>

We have also campaigned for improved concessions from bus companies. Stagecoach have agreed that any elderly bus pass holders who have a hospital appointment before 9.30am can travel free. A number of bus companies have agreed to a £1 flat fare for any journeys made before 9.30.

We have supported various groups of workers taking action including Junior doctors, ASLEF and RMT rail workers. We have also supported activities highlighting other difficulties faced by the elderly including helping with black balloon releases the last two years when the figures for excess winter deaths were announced.

We are not going away!