

After 14 London transport workers die: Unite union and Labour mayor insist “PPE is not required”

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Fourteen public transport workers in London, including nine bus drivers, have died from coronavirus in the last two weeks. An undisclosed number are fighting for their lives in intensive care.

COVID-19 has claimed almost 2,000 lives in the capital and 8,000 across the UK, with bus drivers demanding urgent safety measures to prevent more deaths.

On Wednesday, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan appeared on “Good Morning Britain” (GMB) announcing that nine bus drivers, three London underground workers, one Transport for London (TfL) worker and an employee from a supplier had died from coronavirus. Asked by presenter Susanna Reid, “Are we equipping our public transport workers with enough protective equipment?” Khan replied that “the best possible” safety measures were in place.

This is a lie. Anne Nyack, mother of 36-year-old bus driver Meks Nyack Ihenacho from Holloway garage, said her son died of COVID-19 because bus drivers had no adequate protection.

Nyack made a powerful appeal for PPE (personal protective equipment) for all bus workers:

“My son put his life at risk to do a job he loved and was devoted to. I’m fighting his corner and when all this is over, I’m going to fight to make sure that, in the event of anything like this happening again, they [bus drivers] have the right protective clothing.”

On GMB, Khan was challenged over the dire safety conditions. Pointing to the death of 46-year-old Nadir Nur, who drove the Islington to Hackney route, Reid told Khan that as far as Nur’s widow was concerned, “he and his colleagues had no personal protective equipment.” Co-presenter Piers Morgan told Khan, “You can’t just send drivers to their death.”

Khan’s reply made clear this is precisely what is happening. He told GMB, “Personal Protective Equipment should only be used in care settings. You know the shortage

there is of PPE anyway for the NHS, for our social care staff. Yesterday we re-chased the government on this, and their advice is quite clear: transport workers should not be wearing PPE.”

Khan’s statement makes clear that the Labour Party is collaborating with Boris Johnson’s Conservative government to impose unsafe working conditions on thousands of key workers across public transport and beyond.

Meanwhile the trade unions, including Unite, are functioning as a direct appendage of the transport companies. On Tuesday, Unite issued a joint statement with TfL and Metroline, which operates 15 garages and employs 4,500 bus drivers across London. Metroline is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Singapore-based ComfortDelGro Group, one of the largest passenger transport companies in the world, with a net profit of \$303 million in 2019.

Sent to bus drivers on joint letterhead and signed by Unite’s John Murphy, Metroline’s Steve Harris and TfL’s Claire Mann, the letter is headlined, “The Bus Industry and its People Supporting London.” It lists as its first “principle” working together to “maintain good industrial relations.”

Claiming their “first priority” is “to protect and safeguard our workers and their families,” the letter show the opposite is true. The safety of bus drivers and the general public is to be subordinated to the dictates of Metroline and the criminal incompetence and negligence of the Johnson government.

Bus drivers from garages across London told the WSWs that none of the safety measures listed in the three-page letter—including deep cleaning of buses, social distancing measures and the provision of sanitiser and disinfectant wipes—have been implemented.

Moreover, Unite has joined with TfL and Metroline to declare that PPE is not required! Acknowledging the “concern” of drivers over access to PPE (face masks, gloves and protective clothing), the letter states, “Public Health England (PHE) guidance states that PPE should be reserved

for those working directly with people with COVID-19 symptoms.”

Unite’s joint letter continues, “[PPE] is not recommended as required for those working with individuals without symptoms (asymptomatic). This is in line with current World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance, which states that the best way to protect yourself against COVID-19 is by frequently cleaning your hands.

“Inappropriate use of PPE can increase the risk of infection, and routine use of PPE is not currently recommended for transport workers. TfL has policy in place that covers staff health and safety and has based its approach to the deployment of PPE during this pandemic on national guidance. We will review the position should guidance change.”

Drivers are supposed to take as good coin the recommendations of the Johnson government’s minister for health and senior civil servants at Whitehall! The claim that the best protection for bus drivers is to frequently wash their hands is an insult. Where does Unite suggest drivers “frequently” wash their hands while driving buses in the middle of a lockdown? Washing hands does not offer full protection from the risk of airborne infection from passengers.

According to WHO guidelines published on April 6, 2020, “Advice on the use of masks in the context of COVID-19”: “Any person who is in close contact (within 1 m) with someone who has respiratory symptoms (coughing, sneezing) is at risk of being exposed to potentially infective respiratory droplets. Droplets may also land on surfaces where the virus could remain viable; thus, the immediate environment of an infected individual can serve as a source of transmission (contact transmission).”

The above WHO guidance then states, “Medical masks should be reserved for health care workers.” But this advice is based on rationing the current insufficient supply of PPE, i.e., it accepts that which must be challenged.

Nonetheless, WHO states, “Wearing a medical mask is one of the prevention measures that can limit the spread of certain respiratory viral diseases, including COVID-19. However, the use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide an adequate level of protection, and other measures should also be adopted.”

In other words, bus drivers need more protection than just masks, not less!

Unite’s joint statement with TfL and Metroline has confirmed in the eyes of many drivers that their lives count for nothing. Over the past week drivers have taken angrily to social media to expose the unsafe and filthy conditions in which they are being forced to work.

The collaboration of Unite with the companies and the

Johnson government makes clear the urgent need for workers to take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file committees to ensure safe working conditions.

The following demands must be raised:

- Universal testing for all bus drivers to identify and locate the virus. This will enable health workers to identify those infected, including any potential clusters and take action for the protection of drivers, their families and the public.

- PPE, including masks and gloves, provided immediately to all bus drivers! Hand sanitisers and disinfectant wipes supplied on all buses and at bus stops, for the safety of drivers and passengers alike. Proper washing facilities at garages.

- Buses must be deep cleaned each night with anti-viral agents to provide safety and peace of mind to drivers.

None of these measures can be entrusted to the Johnson government, the mayor of London, TfL, private bus companies or the unions. Workers must reject their lying claims that urgently needed resources and supplies must be rationed. Rank-and-file committees comprising drivers, cleaners, engineers and other key workers must be formed to ensure the necessary resources are made available.

Metroline, Arriva and the other franchise operators have demonstrated that they are incapable of running a safe and secure service in the public interest. The companies must be taken over without compensation and placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.

The WSWs urges bus drivers and other public transport workers who want to join this fight to contact us.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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