

Twenty-nine London transport workers dead from COVID-19, as anger rises over unsafe working conditions

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The number of London public transport workers killed by coronavirus has doubled over the past fortnight, rising from 14 to 29. The mushrooming death toll includes 23 bus drivers and four London Underground and rail workers.

In a perfunctory statement issued yesterday by Transport for London (TfL), Transport Commissioner Mike Brown described the deaths as “an absolute tragedy,” claiming that TfL was doing “everything we can to provide support.” But the actions of TfL, the Conservative government of Boris Johnson, Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan, and the private bus and rail operators are deliberately sacrificing the lives of transport workers. The same profit-driven policies are being enforced by governments and transport corporations across the globe.

More than six weeks after the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic, London bus drivers say they are being treated as an “expendable commodity.”

This past week, Khan and TfL went into damage control after an outpouring of anger by drivers over unsafe working conditions. Lorraine, a driver from South London, was among those whose videos went viral on social media, demanding that authorities “put our lives before profit.”

Lorraine revealed she had written farewell letters to her children, grandchildren and parents, fearing she might join the drivers whose lives had already been lost to COVID-19. “I want my children to have the letters I have written because I am put at risk by TfL and Khan by not providing a safe environment for me to work in.”

She continued, “I’m 63 years of age and I’m proud to drive a London bus. I’m proud to do my job. I’m proud to get frontline service workers to their place of work to help people—that’s why I’m still driving. But I’m frightened... that I’m going to die because nobody in government, Khan, [or] TfL will listen to us.”

With the trade unions joining together with Khan and TfL—Unite issued a letter pledging to “maintain good industrial relations”—drivers began taking action themselves,

sealing holes in their cabin safety screens, taping off seats closest to their cabin and demanding entry via the rear doors only (so passengers did not have to tap-on with their Oyster Card near the driver).

While Arriva and other bus companies threatened disciplinary action, on April 17 TfL sought to tamp down the drivers’ anger with a series of safety measures, including rear-door entry and suspending fare payment across the network.

But drivers have told the WSWs these measures are “too little too late.” While safety screens have been partially sealed (covering holes used to speak with passengers), and front seats closest to the driver have been taped off and sometimes removed, dangerous conditions remain across the bus network:

- Personal protection equipment (PPE), including masks, gloves, and disinfectant wipes, are still not being provided. In line with government policy, TfL claims that masks for drivers “are not required.” Only one pair of disposable gloves per day is being issued at some garages—but only to drivers on the morning shift—and they are being told to reuse these across multiple shifts.

- Sanitiser dispensers at many garages are empty.

- The efficacy of “deep cleaning” by private contractors is being challenged, with drivers posting images of wipes left filthy after cleaning steering wheels, seats and dashboards in the morning.

- Drivers’ cabins are not being disinfected between driver changeover, either at the garage or during live changeovers.

- Large numbers of drivers are off sick at all the garages, yet no testing is being conducted.

- Sick drivers are being pressured to return to work, some reportedly under threat of disciplinary action.

- The drivers' cabins remain open to the rest of the bus due to unsealed gaps in drivers' protection screens (for viewing the inside mirror and where the Oyster Card machine is located).

The threat facing drivers is made clear by the situation at the Cricklewood depot. Four drivers there have reportedly been hospitalised due to COVID-19, with one now recovering at home. At the same time, approximately 90 out of 600 drivers from the garage are off sick—yet none have been offered tests.

A cover-up is underway about the extent of the health emergency facing bus workers. This week, WSWs contacted Unite, TfL and London Mayor Sadiq Khan's office to ask how many drivers have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and how many have been hospitalised. We also asked for a list of garages and workplaces where deaths and illnesses have been recorded.

The WSWs requested that Unite, TfL and London Mayor Sadiq Khan provide the following information:

- The latest confirmed number of bus drivers and TfL staff who have died from COVID-19.
- The number of bus drivers and TfL staff who have been hospitalised with COVID-19.
- The number of bus drivers and TfL staff off sick at home with symptoms consistent with COVID-19.
- The names of all bus garages where confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported and the number of cases at each garage.

A spokesperson from Unite told our reporter the union is “not collecting” information or “keeping an actual tally” of deaths, hospitalisations, or illness locations, saying this was “not our responsibility” and that WSWs should contact TfL.

A spokesperson for the mayor of London also declined to provide any information and asked us to contact TfL.

At first, TfL responded that they would need more time as “this is a fair amount of data you have requested.” Later, it provided a link to a newly published Transport Commissioner's statement confirming 29 deaths—but it refused to provide any information about the number of drivers diagnosed or hospitalised due to COVID-19, or their location.

This suppression of information has life and death consequences. In the absence of data about the location of

confirmed COVID-19 cases—and the denial of testing for all drivers reporting ill—it is impossible for contact tracing to take place to identify workers and members of the public at risk or enact preventive measures to protect lives.

If the number of workers admitted to hospital intensive care units from Cricklewood (four) is repeated across London's approximately 90 bus garages, that would equate to 360 drivers in intensive care. If the number of public transport worker deaths in London recorded so far continues at the same rate, by the end of June 480 workers will have died.

All over the world, the global pandemic has exposed the real character of social and class relations under capitalism. Economic life, including mass transportation, the production and distribution of food and other essential items and urgent medical care for the sick and elderly, rests on the combined social labour of the international working class. Meanwhile, the parasitic character of the financial oligarchy—hostile to social planning, divided into antagonistic national states—has revealed itself as an intolerable obstacle to fundamental social needs.

To combat the political alliance of the Johnson Conservative government, TfL, Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and the pro-company trade unions, London bus drivers must strike out on a new road. Rank-and-file committees of public transport workers must be built, independent of the trade unions, to link together bus, underground and rail workers across the UK, Europe and internationally. In opposition to claims that there is no money for basic safety, the demand must be raised for the expropriation of the major transport corporations under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class—the vast majority of the world's population.



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