

London bus drivers say: “Give public transport workers protection or shut it down”

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Bus drivers at several London garages spoke recently to the World Socialist Web Site about their concerns over the growing death toll among their colleagues from COVID-19. So far, 23 bus drivers in the capital have lost their lives to the virus, along with six London Underground and rail workers.

Drivers describe the unsafe working conditions being enforced by the Johnson Conservative government, private bus operators, Transport for London (TfL) and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, in direct collaboration with the unions.

Due to the danger of disciplinary action, the drivers are speaking anonymously.

A bus driver at Cricklewood garage explained, “Four drivers have been hospitalised with COVID-19 from the garage. One of them is now recovering at home, but three are still in ICU [intensive care units].

“Workers have been told to go back to work before they are fully fit to do so. They are pressured, and they are interviewed without any tests to see if they are fit, to get them back as soon as possible to meet their contracts and targets with TfL. That’s all they are interested in.

“We are told that all buses are deep cleaned. You would think that they are scrubbed from top to bottom, back to front, but that isn’t the case. Someone goes around the bus in a face mask, spraying like a weed-killer. When we go into the cabs to do our own cleaning, they are dirty. The wipes we use are filthy after wiping down the steering wheel, never mind the instrument panel. The same when we do our standard checks on the buttons, poles and seats to make sure that they are safe. We are touching every part of the bus, and it’s clear that this so-called deep cleaning is non-existent.

“When the bus goes in and out of the garage,” the driver continued, “or during a ‘live changeover,’ when passengers are still on the bus on the road, if the driver has a cough the droplets will still be there inside the cabin. The new driver puts their information into the machine. They haven’t got much time to clean before they carry on driving.

“In relation to PPE [personal protective equipment] provision, it varies across different companies and garages, but in relation to Metroline, it’s quite stark. No PPE at all, no face masks, no gloves. It took a long time to get hand sanitiser, and they were small bottles of 70 milliliters.

“They installed hand sanitiser dispensers around the garage, but they are never used as they are always empty. On the counter as you walk in, they have a bucket of hand wipes that you can take, which last a day as there are over 600 drivers at Cricklewood. They don’t come up with another one for a few days then.

“At the moment you have to beg for gloves. There are no face masks still, and they’re saying that masks are ‘not necessary.’ They only give the gloves out in the morning, but then they ask ‘where are the previous gloves?’ They are disposable—you’re only supposed to use them once.

“Also, the services have been reduced to Saturday and Sunday timetables. With Sunday services, it’s a lot less drivers, but the duties are longer.

“A few drivers are petrified. Very scared. I’ve had the experience of a driver breaking down crying due to the situation, as he has a very young family, and is worried about catching it, and worried about work safety.

“Other drivers are very angry, and that is expressed on the company app, and on social media generally. UNITE and other unions covering bus drivers are part and parcel of the general cover-up by the mayor. They put out a letter with Metroline saying it’s business as usual, there’s no need for masks when there were 14 drivers at that time who had passed away tragically. They are a mouthpiece of the company.

“The claim by UNITE that their health and safety reps are working full time at every garage to ensure safety measures are being implemented and maintained is not true. Because of the lack of drivers due to sickness and deaths, they are being pressured to do overtime. One of the reps at Cricklewood is actually doing overtime, so they cannot do the checks.

“In relation to the recent announcement about health and safety changes demanded by workers, it’s just slapdash. There’s no physical barrier at all, so if there is someone coughing and you are driving, there’s nothing to stop the virus coming into contact with you.

“There was talk of sealing the cabin to the public. This hasn’t happened within the company, or other companies. If safety measures were carried out weeks ago there would be a lot of drivers driving today who are not now. It’s a terrible thing to say, but that’s the reality of it.

“Bus drivers are part of a global workforce, and these global companies try to keep you restricted to your own jobs and locations. I saw the action of drivers in Toronto, in Canada, and in other parts of the world. We’re in the same boat whatever country we are in. The same issues, the same level of exploitation, the same questions of how to fight, the same incompetence of the union bureaucracy, and their trying to prevent the workers uniting on these issues internationally.

“A fight against these companies and the unions has to be organised. Rank-and-file committees of drivers and other transport workers are needed, in opposition to the unions, based on a socialist perspective.”

Another driver at Cricklewood said the only reason they knew that colleagues had died at other garages was because drivers had gone public, “There is nothing official that so-and-so has recovered or is in hospital. If we hear about drivers who pass away it’s through their friends and families.”

The driver explained the impact of the virus at Cricklewood was more widespread than acknowledged, “I know that some of the supervisors have got it and they haven’t been hospitalised. There are a lot of people off work, isolating as well, because other members of their family have got symptoms.

“When you take over your bus in the morning, they’re giving you a pair of gloves to do your first check. And that’s the extent of the safety equipment they’re giving us.

“I was speaking to one of the engineers recently and he told me that the engineers have been asked to watch the cleaners to see if they are cleaning the cabs out properly. So the engineers are being asked to spy on the

cleaning staff.

“Also there’s still no hand sanitiser in the dispensers. And it’s been like that since the beginning of March.”

“Some of the night buses are not being cleaned before the day bus drivers are taking them out. They just fuel them and put them out. I’ve seen them do it. So you’ve got to be really careful about which bus you take. I clean my own bus myself.

“We share the staff room with another company and they said a couple of their drivers have passed away in the last three or four days. You only hear about this sort of thing through word of mouth.

“Even NHS [National Health Service] workers are not getting tested unless they’ve got symptoms. Even in the hospitals. You’d think they would be the first to be tested. They’re dealing with unprecedented numbers of people with the illness every day. They have to fight like hell to get a test. They’re not even getting enough gloves or masks or anything.

“Over 17,000 people have died [in the UK]. By the end of the week it’s going to hit 20,000. It’s unbelievable. I can’t believe that in this country, which is one of the wealthiest countries in the world. They’ve spent the money on other things. And this is people suffering and dying because of it. They don’t care about us. The working class is going to pay for this across the board. People are going to lose their jobs. It’s going to be hell after this. Absolute hell.”

A driver for a London franchise owned by Netherlands transport giant Abellio, said the demand should be issued to, “Give public transport workers complete protection or shut it down.”

“It is clear that public transport remains the primary means by which the coronavirus is being transmitted. Almost all international flights have stopped because just one person can introduce the virus into another country.

“Social distancing is virtually impossible to achieve and meaningless on any bus or train, while in fact it’s probably the ‘best’ way to spread the virus, on par with sitting with an infected person in the same room.”

After reading reports on the WSWs, he said the UNITE union was “way behind the ball” in its response to the dangers of COVID-19. “The union has been telling transport workers that we don’t need masks, repeating statements by the government and London Mayor Sadiq Khan that bus drivers don’t need PPE.

“The entire government message is, keep two metres apart—but scientists have recently pointed out that this distance was recommended long ago, in the 1930s and was based on outdated models. Why would Public Health England [PHE] continue recommending outdated information?

“Evidence from more recent research shows that aerosol droplets from people’s breath can stay airborne for several minutes within enclosed spaces such as supermarkets and be propelled up to 27 feet. A bus generally has poor ventilation.

“TfL have started to block up the holes in the plastic shield that is part of the driver’s cab door that separate us from the passengers, while the added sheeting prevents passengers’ breath reaching us directly, but only after we had to take matters into our own hands and began using clingfilm. It’s taken them two months and 14 deaths to do anything.”

As for the claims by Khan and TfL that buses are being deep-cleaned, bus drivers are sceptical of the procedures. “At my garage there are usually just 4 or 5 cleaners. They are under constant pressure to work fast and not well. The bus is swept with a broom and then washed with a single mop (not refreshed from a bucket). In all my time, I have not seen a vacuum cleaner used. As a result drivers are still buying cleaning products in an attempt to stay safe.”

A driver from Holloway garage, where a driver lost his life to coronavirus, told us, “If it wasn’t for our colleagues spreading the word, we wouldn’t know anything. The garage managers want to keep a positive image. But then they started seeing we were making noise. The

drivers went on social media, LBC Radio and Sky and all of a sudden the managers started opening their eyes, and the government and TfL were thinking ‘We’ve got to keep this under control and come up with something to keep them quiet.’”

Safety measures adopted so far were mainly “for show—Right now, it’s the same as the situation in the first week of the lockdown: no gloves, no sanitiser, no face masks. Most of the drivers bring their own.

“We spent the first three weeks of the lockdown with nothing whatsoever. We were advised to go and buy our own stuff. Everyone was having trouble getting supplies—the supermarkets were running out. The company kept saying ‘We’re expecting a delivery.’ We spent three weeks like this until the drivers went to the newspapers and LBC [radio] and suddenly on the fourth week they came up with sanitiser. As for masks, they are saying ‘the government guidelines mean they are not useful so we are not providing them.’ We don’t even have gloves or wet wipes, so they ran out of equipment very quickly.”

The driver explained that London buses do not have air-conditioning filters, meaning “There is no protection either from air being sucked into the bus from outside, or from particles circulating inside the bus, including if someone coughs or sneezes. There was an article in the newspaper saying that TfL is going to ‘install’ filters, but only in 100 buses.

“One of our drivers on the 390 [bus route] has been in hospital—there’s a video where he speaks just after he came off the ventilator. Too many drivers are doing the work with fear on their mind. It’s inevitable this will interfere with our ability to drive. It’s not that we want to, but the fear we are facing is overtaking our mind.”

A driver from another Metrolink garage in London commented, “My thought is they are not doing enough to protect us, and everything that is being done right now is too late. What they should do is shut down the buses for everyone except for essential workers.

“Even recent events like the M20 route where the drivers pushed to help the NHS workers get faster to work, they got into trouble! Our management is not doing anything but making more problems for us. Even recently when we complained about buses not being cleaned.

“Looking at what is happening in other countries we should go on strike firstly. That’s the only way to oppose them now. Like the bus drivers did in Detroit. Also, the Danish drivers in Copenhagen went on strike and in Belgium I think, to enforce COVID-19 protection.

“It needs to be done from the bottom, by the drivers—certainly not by the union. You can see what is happening with recent events like the minute’s silence for the drivers who passed away. It was actually an event forced by the drivers, and after it went through the WhatsApp groups, the Facebook groups, etc., then the union went in and said it was ‘their’ idea to go with the one minute of silence for the drivers.

“They don’t care anything about us. When COVID-19 became a full-blown epidemic in London, one of the garage managers still made sick reviews for the drivers that went on self-isolation. She called them by phone telling them to come in for a sick review. She sent them letters threatening them with dismissal if it happened again.”



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