

Pseudo-left groups block fight by London bus drivers against COVID-19

Laura Tiernan

7 May 2020

Since the global coronavirus pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation on March 11, the Unite union has worked to enforce the diktats of Transport for London, Mayor Sadiq Khan, and the Johnson Conservative government against London bus drivers.

On April 9, Unite issued letters it co-signed with TfL and the bus companies—including Metroline and GoAhead— instructing drivers that “[PPE] is not recommended” and “the best way to protect yourself against COVID-19 is by frequently cleaning your hands.”

The letter provoked outrage. Unite was effectively supporting the Johnson government, shielding its criminal incompetence and refusal to provide the most basic protection.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemned Unite’s letter, opposing the union’s corporatist and pro-capitalist program. We called for rank-and-file committees to demand immediate safety measures, including full PPE and mandatory testing and contact tracing.

Unite’s actions exposed them as company agents in the pocket of the government. Its promise of “industrial harmony” (a pledge cited by Unite in their April 9 letter with TfL) was in line with agreements the Trades Union Congress (TUC) signed with the Tories, pledging to deliver “national unity” during the pandemic. As always, the burden of “national unity” falls solely on the working class.

Drivers’ anger against Unite is at breaking point, and many have expressed agreement on the need to organise independently, asking how this can be done. The first step is to recognise that any serious fight against the dangerous working conditions drivers face is a political struggle, not only against TfL and Unite, but against Labour’s London Mayor Sadiq Khan, the TUC and the Johnson government.

The formation of rank-and-file committees above all means rejecting the politics of pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and People’s Assembly, who seek to bolster Unite, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and train drivers’ union, ASLEF. Their entire political energies are focused on upholding the domination of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and blocking the development of socialist consciousness in the working class.

Socialist Workers Party

On April 7, the SWP’s newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, carried an article, “Stop the deaths of London bus drivers,” noting that eight drivers had died of coronavirus that week. It reported that drivers were terrified of going to work “because of bosses’ failures to safeguard their health,” but made no criticisms of Unite.

Instead, *Socialist Worker* retailed a grovelling promotion of the union, reporting, “Unite regional officer John Murphy said a lack of sanitising wipes was a big problem.” Lack of wipes barely covered the catastrophe

facing drivers, but the SWP indulged Murphy, publishing his lazy excuses without criticism: “I understand that because production is dramatically down and factories are closing there is a real shortage, but we are calling on Transport for London to seek a new source for them as soon as possible”.

The SWP concluded with a quote from Unite Regional Secretary Peter Kavanagh, who said that drivers were “performing a heroic job in getting NHS and care workers to work.” Unite’s depiction of workers as “heroes” amounted to preaching acceptance of unsafe working conditions as the necessary price for preserving the National Health Service. The same political blackmail has been used against NHS and social care workers, with 190 deaths recorded among health and social care workers at the time of writing.

Socialist Worker published its next article on April 16, reporting widespread opposition among bus workers to Unite. Six days earlier, the WSWS had published a report, widely shared among drivers, exposing Unite’s joint statement with TfL and the transport companies. Our article cited information from drivers across London that none of the safety measures claimed by Unite and TfL had been implemented.

The SWP’s response was duplicitous. They acknowledged the growing anger of workers, while trying to steer it back under the control of the pro-company unions. Their article, “Trade unionists in north London demand protection for bus drivers,” focused on a protest outside the Holloway bus garage in Islington that followed the death of driver Emeka Nyack Ihenacho. The “trade unionists” cited by the SWP, including reps from the RMT whom the *Socialist Worker* interviewed, are union bureaucrats who sought to hijack workers’ growing demands for action by staging a wreath-laying ceremony and one minute’s silence for the cameras.

Socialist Worker cited the revealing remarks of a worker from the Holloway garage, that “workers supported the action but felt they couldn’t be part of it. People wanted to be involved but management and the union are against something happening at the garage.”

The same worker is quoted as saying, “I don’t understand why Unite are so close to Transport for London. They need to be standing up more to management and demanding—not negotiating—more safety for the workers. [emphasis added]”

The worker openly states that Unite is suppressing action at the garage and asks the SWP to state its position on a vital issue: “why is the union so close to Transport for London?” But the SWP is silent. It cannot and will not answer this question because that would undermine its defence of the union bureaucracy—of which it is a part (many of its members are trade union officials or reps).

Socialist Worker reports that, “The drivers want their union ‘to stand with them more’”, eager to promote illusions that the unions can be pressured to defend workers’ interests.

The SWP uncritically cites the same worker (quoted above) who suggests that the union “needs to get down onto garage level. Pass through our garages and ask if our guys are alright.” It does so to encourage a false

understanding of the trade unions, concealing their universal transformation over the past four decades into a corporatist arm of the state. It is not simply that unions are “out of touch.” A regular walk-through by union officials at the garages would change nothing. Workers are subjected to these types of stunts on a routine basis, with politicians and members of the Royal Family visiting factories in hi-vis vests, hard-hats, lab coats and hair nets.

The conclusion offered by *Socialist Worker* is that unions “have been slow to make demands—they need to say loud and clear to bosses that workers won’t work without protective kit.”

But unions are not “slow to make demands,” they are in a *direct partnership* with the transport companies and the Tory government *enforcing unsafe working conditions*. Unite and other unions are currently sitting down with government ministers and employer groups to plan a return-to-work that will sacrifice more lives to the profit requirements of the London Stock Exchange.

All the various stunts promoted by the SWP, including the minute’s silence across London buses held on April 17 and today’s “Day of Action,” are aimed at suppressing a genuine fightback by workers and promoting the union bureaucracy. The People’s Assembly—an alliance of trade unions, Stalinists, environmentalists and pseudo-left groups—has been heavily involved in arranging these actions. It is currently led by former Labour MP Laura Pidcock, a protégé of Jeremy Corbyn, who as Labour leader protected the Blairites before handing over power to Sir Keir Starmer.

Socialist Party

The Socialist Party’s defence of the bureaucracy is even more naked. An article by its Industrial Organiser Rob Williams on April 22 spelled out his organisation’s craven defence of Unite. Despite the continuing death toll, Williams hailed “the fantastic victory won by bus drivers who forced Khan and the bus companies to seal the front door. Socialist Party member and leading Unite union bus driver activist Moe Muhsin Manir played a crucial role in building this campaign.”

This was another snow job. Khan and TfL only closed the front doors on London buses and suspended fare payments after workers acted independently of Unite. The Socialist Party’s rewriting of history served a definite agenda, portraying the union in a positive light.

Williams calls for “trade union control over workers’ health and safety, with only a return to a full service if agreed by the elected trade union committees.” Who is the SP kidding? As reported yesterday on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the trade unions are nothing but industrial policemen for the government, enforcing unsafe working conditions throughout industry and exposing countless thousands to infection from COVID-19. The only purpose of such “safety committees” would be to suppress opposition from below.

Williams spells this out, advising Unite that “there must be a democratic London-wide union safety committee of union reps to operate a weekly review of the new safety changes that have been instituted, with input from drivers, *to ensure that there are no knee-jerk reactions to genuine concerns that drivers may have over how they are operating.* [emphasis added]”

The Socialist Party’s attitude to the working class is that of a trade union bureaucrat, bossing workers around and protecting their own domination by silencing dissent.

Williams claims, “Tube unions RMT and Aslef have already indicated that they are prepared to ballot for strike action against the ramping up of services.” In fact, both the RMT and ASLEF have seized on the pandemic

to call off all industrial action. On the London Underground where there was a 95% vote for strike action by drivers, ASLEF refused to act, forcing their members to work without adequate PPE. At South West Rail the RMT called off strike action greenlighting an offensive by the employers to try and enforce Driver Only Operation. So right-wing is the RMT that last month it suspended its General Secretary Steve Hedley—a former member of the Socialist Party—because he joked on Facebook that he’d “throw a party” if Boris Johnson died from coronavirus. This has not stopped the SP from claiming, in their “rank-and-file” newsletter, that the “RMT is a fighting union with socialist politics”!

The Socialist Party’s demands are never directed toward the mobilisation of the working class. They are instead issued as friendly appeals to the trade unions, the Labour Party and the state. Williams declares that “the transport unions must together make it clear to Sadiq Khan that workers’ safety comes first, before profits.” He adds, “Socialist Party transport workers in London have long called for Khan to lead a mass united struggle against TfL budget cuts with the unions and their members.”

Williams continues, “The reality is that Sadiq Khan has no excuse not to defy the Tory government and take whatever measures are necessary to ensure a London transport system safe for transport workers and commuting workers alike.” The SP are such incurable opportunists that it does not even occur to Williams how ludicrous their political line is. Sadiq Khan has “no excuse”... apart from the fact that he is Sadiq Khan! The mayor has no excuse “not to defy the Tory government” in the same way that Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have “no excuse” for not overthrowing capitalism.

Reaching for the past to support his wistful invocation of an austerity-fighting Sadiq Khan, Williams writes, “If Khan declared that he was prepared to take TfL into deficit if necessary, like the Militant-led Liverpool Labour city council did when it won millions of extra resources from Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, would Boris Johnson really risk a conflict over resources for Britain’s key transport hub?”

Unfortunately for the SP, the example of the Militant-led Labour council evaporates on inspection. Its record in the 1980s was a devastating exposure of the claim that Labour can be made into a political vehicle for the socialist aspirations of the working class. Having won support in Liverpool for rejecting budget cuts demanded by Thatcher, Militant’s domination of the city ended in a rout in 1985. Facing bankruptcy, and having secured an additional £30 million in loans, it carried out what it called an “orderly retreat”—producing a legal balanced budget. This opened the way for a witch-hunt launched by Labour leader Neil Kinnock that saw Militant’s expulsion from the Labour Party.

The fight for socialist consciousness

In their coverage of London buses, the SWP and SP are hostile to any focus on the broader political tasks facing bus drivers. Calling themselves “socialist,” in practice they keep workers confined to narrow, sectional trade union politics. While bus drivers are threatened by a *global* pandemic, whose lethal spread is being determined by the murderous actions of capitalist parties and governments the world over, the SWP’s and SP’s coverage rarely leaves the garage door. To the extent that they raise any political demands, these are directed towards capitalist politicians and the state, not the working class.

The SWP and SP conceal the web of political relationships that uphold the domination of capitalism. That is why, in contrast to the WSWS, they kept silent on the joint letter issued by Unite and TfL forcing drivers to work without personal protective equipment (PPE). Any fight against

Unite's corporatist lovefest would have meant a political confrontation with the TUC and Labour Party leadership—a struggle the SWP and SP are bitterly opposed to conducting.

The role of the pseudo-left groups, which intervene at every point in the class struggle to block the fight for socialism, raises urgent theoretical, historical and practical issues for workers in how to develop their fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

In his book, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, WSWS international editorial board chairman David North includes a chapter on “Lenin’s Theory of Socialist Consciousness: The Origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?” North examines the fight led by Russian Marxist Vladimir Ilych Lenin against various petty-bourgeois trends, including the “populists” and “economists,” who rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, seeking to subordinate the nascent working class movement to bourgeois liberalism. As a mass socialist movement of the working class gained strength across Europe at the start of the twentieth century, Lenin aimed fire against the economists, who denigrated the fight for socialist theory and revolutionary leadership.

“Isolated from Social Democracy [i.e., the revolutionary Marxist party],” explained Lenin, “the working class movement becomes petty and inevitably becomes bourgeois. In waging only the economic struggle, the working class loses its political independence; it becomes the tail of other parties and betrays the great principle: ‘The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.’”

Lenin continued: “In every country there has been a period in which the working class movement existed apart from socialism, each going its own way; and in every country this isolation has weakened both socialism and the working class movement. Only the fusion of socialism with the working class movement has in all countries created a durable basis for both.”

North examines several interrelated issues that have enormous relevance today, including why socialist theory cannot develop spontaneously in the working class. He cites Lenin’s famous pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*, published in 1902: “The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc. The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.”

Countless anti-Marxist and pseudo-left academics have attacked Lenin’s insistence on revolutionary theory and political leadership as “elitist,” “undemocratic” and even “totalitarian.” But as North explains, “Underlying this accusation is a form of social bitterness, deeply embedded in class interests and social prejudices, evoked by the effort of the socialist movement to create a different, non-bourgeois form of public opinion, in which the real political and historical interests of the working class find expression.”

The pseudo-left is steeped in such anti-Marxist prejudice. In an article published by the *Socialist Worker* on April 19 to mark the 150th birthday of Lenin, the SWP cited Lenin’s insistence that “class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from outside,” responding, “This can sound like socialists should just tell the rest of the movement what to do or impose their ideas onto the working class.” Under the sub-headline “Militants,” the SWP’s author asserts, “A revolutionary party isn’t about being separate from the working class or

mass movements. It’s about building an organisation of working class militants, who draw struggles together into a bigger fight against the system as a whole.”

The SWP presents the revolutionary party as a combined organisation of trade union militants. But for Lenin, the vanguard party could only be forged on the basis of a relentless theoretical, political and organisational struggle against opportunism, i.e., against the petty-bourgeois advocates of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois interests in the workers’ movement. In a passage which speaks volumes about the SWP, its author writes that the need for a revolutionary party “flows from how working class people’s ideas are uneven. Some want to tear the head off capitalism, while others are reactionaries who buy into the system. The majority sit somewhere in between with progressive and backward ideas. A reformist party—such as the Labour Party—reflects all of those contradictions and panders to backward ideas. A revolutionary party organises together the most militant fighters.”

The SWP speaks only of “working class people’s ideas,” completely omitting the role of party leaders, political programmes, trade unions, academics, media outlets, think-tanks—in short, all of the countless mechanisms employed by the ruling class in order to maintain its ideological and political dominance over the working class. This includes, above all, the role of pseudo-left apologists for the trade union and labour bureaucracy, who call themselves “socialists” but who defend capitalism in word and deed.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact