

33 London bus drivers killed by COVID-19: “We are expendable like diesel”

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13 May 2020

Bus drivers are demanding urgent action on safety after the death of their colleague, Ishrat Ali, from COVID-19. Drivers at the Cricklewood garage in north west London say the circumstances surrounding Ali’s death show they are at heightened risk from the Johnson government’s return to work plans announced on Sunday night.

Ali, 65, a Metroline driver for 28 years, died on May 5. He was widely respected. “Mr Ali was an approachable, good natured driver, he had plenty of banter and was always pleasant”, a driver told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “He was a person everyone could get on with,” said another.

Drivers at Cricklewood have reacted angrily to news of Ali’s death. Drivers feel they are “expendable like diesel.”

A long-time driver said, “It is disgraceful that his illness was kept quiet by the company. We did not find out until it was posted on the company app that Ali has passed away.”

Another explained, “28 years at this garage, and all there was is a piddly little notice from the manager... We were just told on the Blink site that he had passed away. We were not told how.”

Cricklewood is one of London’s biggest garages. Its 600 drivers operate 17 routes, including the busy number 16 through central London which Ali drove. With five different shifts, drivers say it can be hard to detect when a colleague is missing: “I tried to get in touch with another driver on the same route as Ali. He contacted me today—he was in a coma from the 21st of March until the 31st of March with Covid-19. He has recovered, but how many more are unwell and sick? We are consciously being kept in the dark.”

“We were shocked and saddened at the news about Ali,” a driver said, “God help us, why wouldn’t our company or TfL [Transport for London] notify us? They have the means to. A lot more drivers are masking up. Some drivers are displaying cold/flu symptoms... it’s distressing.”

Metroline confirmed yesterday that Ali reported sick on April 1. He was admitted to Northwick Park Hospital on April 21 and was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) where he died 14 days later. Responding to questions from the WSWs, Metroline confirmed there are 17 COVID-19-related absences at Cricklewood, including eight diagnosed COVID-19 cases. Three drivers are in hospital.

As reported two weeks ago, TfL has refused to disclose the location of garages where COVID-19 deaths have occurred. Nor will they say how many drivers have been diagnosed and hospitalised with the virus across London. Last Friday, the WSWs

asked TfL’s press office three follow-up questions:

1) What is the confirmed number of deaths and cases of COVID-19 among London bus workers, broken down by company and garage?

2) What is the confirmed number of deaths and cases of COVID-19 among all TfL public transport workers, broken down by company and location?

3) What testing and contact tracing measures have been implemented by TfL at London bus garages in order to protect workers’ lives?

TfL declined to respond and pointed to their “condolence page”—which consists of a nine-sentence statement by Transport Commissioner Mike Brown. The Unite union has been equally silent, claiming information about the location of driver fatalities is “not our responsibility.”

In scenes reminiscent of the Grenfell Tower fire, drivers have compiled their own list of fatalities. One such list, circulating on Twitter, reveals a cluster of four COVID-19 deaths at Westbourne Park garage. Greenford, Holloway and Lea Valley Interchange have each recorded two fatalities. A separate list of driver fatalities has been compiled by the WSWs and includes public transport deaths beyond London.

Workers at Cricklewood say that unsafe working conditions are killing drivers. “The company have no concern at all about our health and they pressure drivers off sick to return before they are fit. The company call it ‘keeping in touch’ but it’s nothing short of harassment.

“TfL and the mayor [Labour’s Mayor of London Sadiq Khan] do not think we are important enough to be properly protected, we are just an expendable commodity to them. If you ask for protective gloves or hand sanitiser it’s like demanding the earth and you are questioned on why you need them.”

Another driver said current safety measures are “pointless and poorly implemented. Why block holes around driver’s perspex [safety screen] when there are so many gaps? We are in a capsule with all that covid air circulating around us. They say, ‘We’ll provide gloves... oh, we’ve run out!’ They issue a tiny hand sanitizer which lasts a few days, and if you ask for another it’s, ‘You were issued one.’ Thank you, but I feel my safety is of no concern to transport companies.”

On Sunday, the *Times* reported the death of driver Ranjith Chandrapala, 64, who drove the 92 bus in West London to and from Ealing Hospital. The article cited Unite regional officer John

Murphy stating that “drivers are petrified of what will happen next.” Needless to say, Murphy was not challenged over Unite’s corporatist relationship with Metroline, TfL and the Johnson government. It was Murphy who signed a joint letter with Metroline and TfL on April 7, informing drivers they did not require face masks.

“The unions do not do what it says on the tin,” said a driver from Cricklewood, “They appear to be the HR department of the company. Where’s our PPE?” (personal protective equipment). Another driver agreed, “The union sing the same tune as the bosses and go along with everything they say and want. The union’s name is Unite, yes, they unite with management against the workers. But whether it’s UNITE, GMB or RMT, they all do the same thing, defending their cosy relationship with the company.”

The *Times* cited calculations by Unite that, “based on floor space and social distancing of two metres, the maximum number of passengers for a double-decker is only 15, while single decker buses can take only five to seven.” Yet Unite has taken no action to enforce social distancing across London’s bus network.

So far, 33 London bus drivers have died from coronavirus. Occupational data released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on Monday shows that bus drivers in England and Wales are dying from COVID-19 five times faster than National Health Service (NHS) workers. The death rate for bus and coach drivers is 26.4 per 100,000 cases. Only taxi drivers have suffered a higher death rate—36.4 deaths per 100,000, based on 76 deaths.

Across TfL, a further 10 underground and railway staff have died. A veteran train driver told the WWS he feared infections will soar following Sunday night’s “phased exit” announced by the Johnson government, “Once the increase in passengers takes place, social distancing rules are impossible to maintain. The station and platform staff are already totally exposed. They will be mixing within inches of hundreds of people.”

Already, London bus drivers are reporting increased passenger numbers. At Cricklewood and elsewhere, patience is running out, “We should stop all buses and get all cabs isolated. What’s the point of all the cleaning and taping off if the driver you’re taking over from is infected? They should test all drivers. I like my job, but why should my life be at risk to do it? We, the carbon-based life forms behind the steering wheel, are not mere diesel which you burn and get more.”

“We need to make sure we defend the lives of the ones at the wheel, now and tomorrow,” his colleague agreed. “This means organising ourselves in each garage, and across garages and companies, to safeguard our very lives.”

The fight for rank-and-file committees must begin at every garage. These must link up with rail and underground workers across the UK, seeking out the active support and cooperation of transport workers in Europe and internationally.

Drivers’ lives must not be sacrificed to defend the profits of the major transport corporations or the homicidal back-to-work policies of the Johnson government! Every driver’s life is precious! Not a single bus should depart without comprehensive safety measures in place. The Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands:

- Full PPE for every driver, including masks, gloves, sanitiser, and disinfectant wipes, provided on a daily basis in line with drivers’ needs.

- The full sealing of the drivers’ cabins and installation of air filtration systems in all buses.

- Full nightly deep cleaning of buses and effective anti-viral cleaning after every “rounder”.

- All drivers to be informed as soon as any new case of COVID-19 is confirmed at their garage.

- Full contact tracing at all garages, along with regular testing for all drivers and garage staff.

- Immediate self-isolation on full pay for all drivers experiencing illness or symptoms of COVID-19. Self-isolation on full pay for all at-risk drivers with underlying medical conditions.

- Strict social distancing to be introduced on all buses with immediate effect, including a 15-passenger limit on double-deckers and 7 passengers for a single deck bus.

- The introduction of shorter shifts on full pay to protect drivers’ health and decrease exposure to the virus. The practice of long shifts that damage drivers’ health must be immediately ended.

These measures cannot be realised through the trade unions—whether UNITE, RMT or ASLEF—or through appeals to the Tories, Labour, Greens, or Liberal Democrats which are all paid defenders of the financial oligarchy. The working class can only defend its most basic rights through the methods of class struggle and the fight for socialism. The public transport corporations must be placed under public ownership and their wealth seized as part of the fight for a workers’ government. This means the construction of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.

We urge all workers who agree with this to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)