

London bus drivers face COVID-19 disaster: Build rank-and-file safety committees!

Laura Tiernan**5 June 2020**

The death toll from COVID-19 among bus drivers and rail and tube workers will rise dramatically in the coming weeks and months unless the back-to-work plans of the Johnson government, Transport for London (TfL) and the transport unions are overturned.

This is the inescapable conclusion from a review of tripartite directives they have issued.

At least 43 transport workers in London, including 29 bus drivers, have died from COVID-19. Funerals for three bus drivers who died in April and May were held last week—for Emeka Nyack Ihenacho from Holloway bus garage, Richard Whitfield from Bexleyheath garage, and Arnie Naylor from Stagecoach in Lancashire.

The funeral for Naylor, a 56-year-old father of three, was held last Thursday. Colleagues paid tribute with a drive-by outside Chorley Hospital, on the route which Naylor drove. On the same day, more than 100 drivers paid respects to Ihenacho, a 36-year-old father of one, as the hearse carrying his body passed through Islington in London. On May 26, Whitfield's funeral cortège, with a bus bearing his name followed by dozens of motorbikes, passed Bexleyheath garage. More than 200 drivers applauded his memory.

While TfL has refused to confirm dates, press reports show the majority of driver fatalities occurred in April. Deaths declined in May, reflecting the belated introduction of lockdown measures on March 23 that are now being lifted.

Despite 31,855 COVID-19 deaths and 8,000 new infections a day, the Johnson government announced on May 10 the resumption of bus, rail, tram, underground and ferry services across the UK as part of a “phased” reopening of the economy. In keeping with his government’s herd immunity strategy, all efforts to suppress the virus were abandoned.

Rushed guidance issued by TfL on May 11 set out the timetable for a resumption of full service within weeks:

“In keeping with plans on the national rail network, TfL is working to safely and gradually build up service levels to where they were before the pandemic and will return the number of buses and trains running to as close to 100 percent as soon as possible. TfL is working closely with staff and the trade unions with the intention of, by 18 May, increasing service levels to around 85 percent on the bus network, at least 70 percent on the Tube and London Overground (in line with national rail services), 80 percent on the DLR and an increased service on London Trams and TfL Rail.”

Buses are now running to 80 percent service levels, with the aim of reaching 100 percent capacity by June 15, to coincide with the reopening of non-essential retail. All of this has been agreed by transport unions, including Unite.

Deliberate endangerment of life

Published under the heading, “Restarting London,” TfL claimed its travel plans would, “help London re-open carefully, safely and sustainably” adding, “We’re in this together.”

The scale of criminality involved in herding bus drivers and other transport workers onto crowded vehicles in the midst of a pandemic cannot be overstated.

Johnson claimed his government’s return-to-work “road map” would be “driven by the science” and that “public transport operators will be following Covid-secure standards.” As every driver knows, transport companies refused to provide “secure standards” even at the height of the pandemic. The government’s directives, along with those of the TfL and Unite, are based on the suppression of vital scientific evidence, and constitute a deliberate endangerment to life.

TfL’s travel advice asks passengers to “reimagine their journeys where possible,” suggesting “walking or cycling” and urging that “public transport should be avoided wherever possible.” Most Londoners commute on average 13 miles a day, with only 7 percent living and working in the same borough according to employment agency Totaljobs, making such advice meaningless. Drivers across London report their buses are already crowded, with social distancing a dead letter.

The government’s public transport guidance is shot through with duplicity. It states, “Public Health England recommends keeping a 2 metre distance from other people, where possible,” before adding, “Where this is not possible you should keep the time you spend near others as short as possible and avoid physical contact.” Before the pandemic, London buses had a daily ridership of 6 million per workday. By mid-June, most of these millions will be back.

Last month, Unite told Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* that social distancing on buses could be achieved only if passenger numbers are limited to 15 on a double-decker and seven on a single deck bus. But they have done nothing to enforce this.

In relation to face masks, the government’s Department of Transport now advises, “There are some circumstances when wearing a face covering may be marginally beneficial as a precautionary measure. The evidence suggests that wearing a face covering does not protect you, but it may protect others if you are infected but have not yet developed symptoms.”

What China showed

Chinese scientists investigating a cluster of COVID-19 cases in Hunan province found 13 bus passengers caught coronavirus from a single person. Aerosol droplets travelled from passenger “A” and infected passengers more than six rows ahead. None of them wore facemasks. Passenger “A” boarded a fully booked 48-seat coach on January 22. He

sat two rows from the back and CCTV footage confirmed he did not move throughout the four-hour journey. Despite this, he infected eight other passengers.

A diagram prepared by the Chinese Centre for Disease Control shows the location of passengers infected by passenger “A” who is shaded red. Eight passengers were infected, including an asymptomatic carrier who is shaded blue.

After they left the bus, new passengers boarded 30 minutes later. One of these passengers became infected by contact with aerosol droplets which remained airborne. Passenger “A” then travelled on a minibus for another hour, infecting two more passengers, one of whom sat 4.5 metres away.

“It can be confirmed that in a closed environment with air-conditioning, the transmission distance of the new coronavirus will exceed the commonly recognised safe distance,” the scientists wrote in the peer-reviewed *Practical Preventive Medicine* journal, published March 6.

They added, “The possible reason is that in a completely enclosed space, the airflow is mainly driven by the hot air generated by the air conditioning. The rise of the hot air can transport the virus-laden droplets to a greater distance.”

Chinese government epidemiologists said their findings challenged current safe distancing guidance issued by world health authorities. They pose urgent questions around air conditioning systems, including those installed on buses, trains, trams, planes and tube/underground systems.

Because the Chinese government had not yet declared a national health emergency, the driver of the Hunan bus and most of his passengers were not wearing facemasks. No passenger who wore a facemask was infected. “Our advice is to wear a face mask all the way [through the bus ride],” the scientists said.

A US study published in April found the subway system “seeded” the coronavirus epidemic in New York City (NYC), acting as a “disseminator.” More than 100 NYC subway workers have died from COVID-19. None of this has stopped the UK government, TfL or Unite from continuing to push unsafe and unscientific guidance.

Unite’s corporatist partnership

Unite has signed off on the Johnson government’s COVID-19 transport plan despite the *serious and imminent danger* it poses to drivers and the travelling public. It is now ramming through TfL’s directives over the opposition of drivers.

A Unite press release on May 29 stated the union, “has given its qualified support to the announcement by Transport for London (TfL) that from tomorrow (Saturday 30 May) there will be a phased return to front door entry on London buses.”

Unite claimed the “phased return” to normal service would include “new screens, developed in conjunction with experts at University College London (UCL) and that completely seal the driver’s cab.” Drivers have posted photos showing cabins are still exposed, with a Metroline driver telling WSWS, “The plastic just hangs down, so you can put your hands through.”

Unite also claimed that “shop stewards and safety reps will inspect and clear each bus before front door loading is re-introduced.” But a Metroline driver said, “There doesn’t seem to be any overall standards. It’s being left to the operators to do the bare minimum.”

In relation to safe passenger loads, Unite stated, “TfL is also introducing reduced capacity on buses to help ensure social distancing. Double deckers will be allowed to carry 20 passengers while single deckers will carry between six and 10 customers.”

Drivers across multiple garages told WSWS these claims are

“completely farcical.” Drivers from Cricklewood and Holloway report bus passenger numbers are at 80 percent capacity. “I’ve had 60-70 people on the bus,” explained the driver of a three-door double-decker.

In April, in the midst of a growing wave of driver fatalities, Unite signed a secret tripartite agreement with TfL and the bus companies titled, “The Bus Industry and its People Working Together to Support London.”

Bus safety campaigner Tom Kearney has submitted a Freedom of Information request to TfL seeking “all documentation, emails, drafts, meeting minutes and handwritten notes pertaining to the Tripartite Agreement.” The WSWS will report the outcome of Kearney’s request, but the political content of Unite’s agreement with TfL and the bus operators is clear.

On April 10, the WSWS reported on joint letters by Unite, TfL and the bus companies declaring that personal protective equipment (PPE) was “not required” and that they were committed to “good industrial relations” as a “first principle.”

Unite’s corporatist agreement is part of broader commitments by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) with the Johnson government. The TUC’s misnamed document, “Protecting workers’ safety in the coronavirus pandemic,” begins with the sentence, “Keeping the UK’s economy moving during this exceptional time is essential.”

The TUC sets out five “key tasks” during the pandemic, including, “Establish a tripartite network, involving employers, unions and the HSE [Health and Safety Executive], with the power to instruct employers that refuse to take reasonably practicable safety measures to cease work.” Union officials are in daily closed-door discussions with the Johnson government, with Labour’s full support.

Last month, Unite issued guidance on the Health and Safety Act, including the provision that workers are protected from dismissal if they withdraw their labour “in circumstances of danger which the employee reasonably believes to be serious and imminent and which they could not reasonably be expected to have averted.”

Unite’s Assistant General Secretary of Legal and Political Affairs, Howard Beckett, advised drivers, “It is for individuals to make their own decisions in their own workplace as to whether there are ‘circumstances of danger’ which they ‘reasonably believe’ to be ‘serious’ and ‘imminent’ so as to justify leaving the workplace.” What a fraud! Having given the Johnson government, TfL and the companies a free hand to endanger workers’ lives, Unite tells drivers it’s up to them as “individuals” to decide whether they will continue working! Beckett’s subsequent promise in capital letters that if workers are dismissed “UNITE WILL SUPPORT YOU,” is worthless.

If bus and other transport workers are to protect themselves, their families and their passengers, new organisations and a new perspective are needed.

The Socialist Equality Party invites bus and transport workers to participate in this Sunday’s online forum, “COVID-19: Organise rank-and-file health and safety committees for bus and transport workers!” Speakers from the London buses and national rail will be joined by Berlin bus driver and Socialist Equality Party member Andy Niklaus and WSWS reporter Daniel De Vries. They will answer questions about the COVID-19 death toll among workers internationally and the fightback which must be organised to save lives.

Register here for Sunday’s online meeting



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