

London bus drivers' lives threatened by union collusion on inadequate COVID-19 measures

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Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has proposed a memorial to 44 London transport workers who died from COVID-19 as a direct result of his government's criminal policies. He did so amid a back-to-work drive that threatens the lives of countless bus and transport workers, who are being denied basic safety protections.

Shapps' proposal followed Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson's announcement on Tuesday halving two-metre social distancing. Shapps led efforts to scrap the two-metre rule after intense lobbying from transport companies. The reduction will take effect from July 4, with Transport for London (TfL) confirming it is now "working with Government to understand the guidance around the safe implementation of these changes."

Scientists have responded with alarm. Professor John Edmunds, an epidemiologist who sits on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), warned yesterday, "Relaxing the 2-metre rule at the same time as opening bars and restaurants does run the risk of allowing the epidemic to start to regain a foothold."

He added, "These changes will have to be very carefully monitored and the NHS track-and-trace system will have to be working properly to help keep us safe." But the government's track-and-trace system is barely functional, with the World Health Organisation warning last week that lockdown measures in the UK should not be eased until an effective contact tracing system is in place.

Under these conditions, the Unite union is playing a crucial role for the government and TfL in policing the back-to-work drive and concealing the immense dangers facing bus and transport workers.

New safety protections announced last month by TfL and Unite—including screens around bus drivers' cabins, a limit on the number of passengers and compulsory wearing of facemasks—were used to justify a resumption of full service across the bus network.

The new measures, however, are inadequate. Images

posted on social media show cabin safety screens melted by summer heat, with gaping holes and dangling flaps of loose plastic. Other photos show unsealed spaces surrounding Oyster ticket machines and along ceilings, leaving drivers exposed to aerosol droplets circulating throughout the bus.

On May 29, Unite gave its "qualified support" to the resumption of front door fare payment. It claimed new cabin screens installed by TfL would "significantly reduce" risks to drivers from COVID-19, based on "extensive work by a multidisciplinary team from UCL's [University College London] Centre for Transport Studies and Department of Civil, Environmental & Geomatic Engineering to assess the risks for drivers in their cabs". A virtually identical statement was issued by TfL the same day, citing "collaborative work with UNITE and bus operators."

TfL has refused to provide scientific evidence to back up its claims that their new screens "significantly reduce" the risks to drivers. Last Thursday, after the WSWs requested more information about the screens and access to someone who worked on the project, TfL replied, "Those working on the assessment of the screens wouldn't do interviews, as they are not media spokespeople." [On June 29, UCL responded to earlier questions from the WSWs with a single line statement that, "The screens were not designed by UCL. The role of UCL researchers was to simulate and quantify airflow and droplet concentrations into and out of the driver's cabin under various scenarios." But requests for documents outlining their advice to TfL have so far gone unanswered.]

WSWS asked TfL for copies of the scientific advice UCL provided on the efficacy of the safety screens, whether epidemiologists and public health officials were consulted as part of the design process, and if so, what was their input. More than one week later, TfL has refused to answer these questions, asserting that "we have followed the science and applied the findings as quickly as possible (*in discussion with both the bus operators and Unite*) to ensure the safety

of our colleagues on the front line” (emphasis added).

The Johnson government handed nearly £400 million in coronavirus subsidies to bus companies in April, and a £1.6 billion bailout to TfL. Yet no additional staff have been hired to ensure adherence to social distancing. Instead, overworked, stressed, and fatigued drivers have been left to enforce new laws on passenger facemasks along with TfL’s passenger limits (20 per double-decker and 10 per single-deck bus)—an impossible task.

“It is clear the policy has been put out with no concern of how to implement it,” a driver told WSWs. “How do you manage large numbers of people getting on and off, keeping a tally of those on board, while safely driving a bus?”

Perhaps the clearest public indication of Unite’s collusion with TfL and bus operators is the advice it has issued on face masks. In April, the union issued a joint letter with TfL and the bus companies telling workers they should not wear face masks as these were “not recommended” by Public Health England. This was the same line being spouted by Labour Party London Mayor Sadiq Khan in media interviews, fuelling outrage among drivers.

After new laws made face masks mandatory on public transport, Unite responded by rewriting history, issuing a statement that “Unite has proclaimed victory for bus drivers and the travelling public after the government announced on Thursday (June 4) that all people traveling on public transport in England will be required to wear face coverings from June 15.”

Unite claimed they had been “actively lobbying the government to introduce the measure,” omitting any reference to their earlier advice.

Bobby Morton, Unite’s national officer for passenger transport, nevertheless “highlighted” what he claimed was a “lack of clear-cut scientific evidence showing face coverings categorically protect people from the virus,” concluding that “any protective effect, however small, was better than none” and that facemasks would at least support “bus workers’ mental health.”

Last week, Unite issued a follow-up “ruling on facemasks” sowing further confusion and complacency: “Your union has always stated its firm belief that, although face coverings would not offer a great deal of protection to the wearer, it would reduce the risk of passengers passing on the virus to others and potentially infecting drivers. ... It is important to understand that this is not to protect the wearer from catching the virus, it is to reduce the risk of the wearer contaminating other people and if all passengers are wearing face coverings the risk of the virus being transmitted is greatly reduced.”

Unite concluded this mass of sophistry by declaring, “Face coverings for London bus drivers will remain optional. ...

You choose if you want to wear a face covering.”

Drivers report that many of their colleagues are declining to wear face masks for a variety of reasons. “Having a face mask on creates a foggy mist on my glasses,” explained one driver. “Additionally, it tends to worsen my hay fever symptoms and after a prolonged time of wearing it I have problems with my eyes and skin around my face. My GP said that this might be the effects of the mask collecting dust and pollen and keeping it close to my face.”

A colleague concurred, saying, “The face masks provided by the companies are not adequate for driving.” Other drivers have pointed to the new cabin screens believing they provide adequate protection, a worrying conclusion in light of TfL’s refusal to publish scientific evidence that they work.

Another driver said of the problem, “Facemasks are an important safety measure, but I find it difficult to wear. What is needed is a high-quality, high spec mask with our traffic conditions in mind. This would show that safety is a priority for drivers, but that costs and the companies won’t pay.”

“We are also told ‘do not engage’ with passengers who refuse to wear masks. When the bus is full, I’ll change the sign on the front of the bus and skip the next stop, but if someone presses the button you’ve got no choice with people running to get on board. It’s why we need conductors—those roles should never have been eliminated and the union did nothing to fight it.”

Workers must reject claims by the Johnson government, the unions and TfL that there is no money for state-of-the-art safety. Last year, the combined profits of the major London bus operators—including Abellio, GoAhead, Arriva and ComfortDelGro—ran to billions of pounds. These global conglomerates exploit millions of workers across Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Asia, who face the same threat from a pandemic that is exposing the brutal class reality and failure of capitalism.



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