

Transport for London downplayed COVID-19 dangers to bus, rail and tube workers in critical early months

Laura Tiernan
16 July 2020

Transport for London (TfL) deliberately minimised the COVID-19 threat to bus and transport workers during January and February this year, even as the World Health Organisation (WHO) instructed countries to take urgent action.

New documents reveal that TfL focused on operational efficiency at the expense of workers' lives, with TfL bosses, including Chief Safety, Health and Environment Officer Lilli Matson, insisting the COVID-19 risk to bus, rail and tube workers was "low" and that gloves and facemasks should not be worn.

London's Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan released a 19-page batch of internal TfL memos last week, after a request from Conservative Member of the London Assembly Keith Prince. The documents exclude any communication between TfL, Khan, and government ministers, but they expose criminal neglect of workplace health and safety.

They show how the Johnson government's homicidal herd immunity strategy resulted in a catastrophic spread of COVID-19 among transport workers in London that would ultimately claim 44 lives, including those of 29 bus drivers.

Between January 23 and February 28, TfL internal directives about managing coronavirus included:

- **"Despite some sensational headlines, there is no cause for alarm"** (Bulletin to Operational Managers, January 23)

- **"We are confident that our colleagues are at low risk at work—including those in customer facing roles"** (Bulletin to London Underground Area Managers, Train Operations Managers and equivalents in R&E and Assets, and Bulletin to all Operational Line Managers Surface Transport, February 14, 2020) and **"We must emphasise that the risk to individuals in the UK remains low"** (Letter to all 300 TfL leaders from Lilli Matson Chief Safety, Health and Environment Officer, February 27, 2020)

- **"We are not providing masks or encouraging colleagues to wear them as they are a poor form of protection against viruses including coronavirus"** (Bulletin to all Operational Line Managers, Surface Transport, February 14, 2020)

"[Masks] make our network appear an unnecessarily risky environment which could result in undue fear and panic" and "Avoid local PA announcements on trains or stations in relation to coronavirus at this stage".

All the documents released by Khan cite the authority of Public Health England, with the desired implication that TfL and the Mayor of London were only following orders. In reality, all of these "stakeholders" shared the same objective: protecting profits not lives. TfL directives included

statements that: "Public Health England doesn't advise the use of masks or gloves as protection from coronavirus." And: "We have based our plans around advice from the experts: Public Health England and our Occupational Health colleagues. They currently assess the risk to individuals in the UK as low." Lilli Matson is presumably one of TfL's "Occupational Health colleagues", appointed Chief Safety, Health and Environment Officer in September 2019 despite having no health and safety qualifications.

PHE is not a neutral health body. An executive agency established by the Tories in 2013 under the Health and Social Care Act (2012), its Chief Executive Duncan Selbie has no public health expertise (in 2013 he joked to the *Lancet*, "You can fit my public health credentials on a postage stamp"). PHE's craven defence of the government was underscored in March when it downgraded COVID-19 from a "high consequence infectious disease" so that personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements for health workers could be eviscerated. More than 500 health care workers have since died.

Advice from PHE and TfL that coronavirus posed a "low risk", contradicted warnings from WHO and from leading epidemiologists. On January 30, WHO declared an international health emergency, calling for immediate action by governments: "it is still possible to interrupt virus spread, provided that countries put in place strong measures to detect disease early, isolate and treat cases, trace contacts, and promote social distancing measures commensurate with the risk." Six days earlier, scientists warned the UK government's emergency COBRA committee that COVID-19 might cause "mass casualties", while epidemiologists told the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) on January 22 that the virus had a potential reproduction rate above 3.0—higher than the Spanish Flu which caused 50 million deaths between 1918 and 1920. Epidemiologists from Imperial College London urged lockdown measures to halt a potentially catastrophic loss of life.

But scientists' warnings were suppressed or swept aside. In late February, as COVID-19 overwhelmed health systems in Italy and Spain, provoking growing public concern, Prime Minister Boris Johnson cited PHE guidance to justify inaction on social distancing, testing, and contact tracing. For TfL, Khan and the private transport companies too, it was business as usual.

TfL: "super-spreader"

One incident providing an early warning of the role TfL and the bus companies would play in spreading COVID-19 was the UK Bus Summit

held on February 6. Despite calls by WHO for social distancing, the conference went ahead at the QEII Centre in London, bringing together 250+ delegates, including TfL and bus company executives and MPs. Baroness Vere, Minister with Responsibility for Buses, delivered the keynote address. David Brown, Chief Executive of Go-Ahead; Mark Threapleton, Chief Operations Officer, Stagecoach; and Gareth Powell, Managing Director of Surface Transport, TfL, also spoke.

Seven days later, conference organiser *Transport Times* emailed delegates informing them that a fellow-attendee had been diagnosed with COVID-19. According to a BBC report on February 14, “The email included advice from PHE urging delegates that no action was needed if they felt well.”

There is no mention of the London Bus Conference in the internal TfL memos released by Khan. Did PHE officials carry out contact tracing after the bus conference? If not, there is every possibility that attendees, including TfL and bus industry executives and MPs, passed the virus to others. At least one employee from TfL head office was later reported to have died from coronavirus, although no further details have been provided by TfL. At the end of February, a Nike conference held in Edinburgh became a super-spreader event infecting 25 people.

Tom Kearney, a prominent bus safety campaigner told WSWs, “The COVID-19 outbreak at the UK Bus Summit was an alarming indicator that TfL’s bus contractor employees were probably already infected. The fact that there is no mention of that outbreak in any TfL internal communication in February suggests to me that an important opportunity to prevent the deaths of 33 London bus workers was lost.”

Even before the pandemic, TfL’s surface transport system was being described by a former board member as “institutionally unsafe.” By February 2019, 1,062 people had been killed or seriously injured in TfL bus collisions over the preceding five years. A study by Loughborough University in 2019 found that 36 percent of London bus drivers had a “close call” due to tiredness in the previous 12 months.

By February this year, bus drivers were at breaking point. Anger over punishing shifts, cuts to break times, and poor pay forced the Unite union to call a London-wide “consultative” strike ballot. More than 97 percent of members voted for strike action, but Unite refused to organise a follow-up ballot, and, as the pandemic took hold, it signed a Tripartite Agreement with TfL pledging to deliver “industrial harmony.”

Workers left defenceless

Workers were left defenceless in the face of the pandemic. The documents released by Khan show that TfL’s Head of Network Delivery Richard Jones advised managers to downplay the threat level to TfL’s workforce. On February 14, he directed them to discourage masks because “they make our network appear an unnecessarily risky environment” and instructed them to “Avoid local PA announcements on trains or stations in relation to coronavirus at this stage.” Instead, “frontline leaders” were told to “reassure colleagues. This will be a big support in making our people feel safe at work and will help us continue to run a good service for Londoners.”

From late February, TfL’s memos focused on curbing absenteeism. On February 27, Matson sent an email to all 300 TfL managers stating, “In essence, there is no change to the way we should be managing absence. Managers should continue to follow the usual absence policy for managing colleagues not at work due to reasons linked to coronavirus.”

Managers were directed to contact ill workers “by phone.” If absenteeism due to COVID-19 was “affecting resourcing levels”, Matson instructed, “Contact your manager in the first instance, who can escalate

where required.” Throughout April and May, sick drivers told WSWs they were being harassed to return to work. TfL’s memos prove this was policy.

Khan’s much publicised “bus bonus retention scheme” announced on February 14 must be seen in this context. Drivers would receive a £1,000 bonus after two years on the job, and another £600 if they stayed for three years. Khan hoped the measure would avert a crippling staff shortage during the pandemic. In retrospect, one driver calls it “blood money”.

“Their whole approach was criminal neglect”, the driver told WSWs. “Reading these documents, they are saying ‘no face masks, no gloves, no safety announcements’... It’s complete disregard for life.”

To this day, TfL and Khan have refused requests, including under Freedom of Information, to disclose the date and work location of COVID-19 infections, deaths and hospitalisations. Clusters of infection—including at Cricklewood, Holloway and Westbourne Park garages—were only discovered later, after drivers and bus safety campaigners began piecing together scattered press coverage.

Kearney says he is not surprised by TfL’s ongoing cover-up. “In my opinion, TfL’s obstruction of public scrutiny is a deliberate attempt to hide the poor working conditions and safety practices which underpin these services’ highly-regarded timeliness and availability. I’d have thought intentionally running a public surface transport system that kills and injures (a) for the convenience of its passengers and (b) the profitability of its contractors, would qualify as a textbook case of corporate manslaughter.”

Unite joined with Khan, TfL, and the bus companies to insist that PPE was not required and took no steps to investigate workplace infections and deaths, stating that it was not their responsibility. As the Johnson government reopened the economy, the unions were again on board, pushing a return to normal rosters based on lying claims that drivers’ safety would be protected. The reality is that drivers are back on crowded buses, left to fend for themselves.

Unite and TfL both claimed that safety screens installed in drivers’ cabins had been designed by experts at University College London, but a UCL spokesperson told the WSWs, “The screens were not designed by UCL.” He explained, “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.” Neither UCL nor TfL have been willing to provide any further information.

To prevent a new wave of infections, bus and transport workers must take the fight against the pandemic out of the hands of the Johnson government, TfL, Mayor Sadiq Khan and the transport unions. Rank-and-file safety committees should be elected at every bus garage and rail depot, led by trusted workers, to introduce necessary safety measures to save lives. The resources to pay for proper safety, decent wages and income protection for sick and shielding workers must be freed through the expropriation of the major transport companies under workers’ control, as part of the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact