

Israeli bus drivers' strike over COVID-19 safety concerns

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Bus drivers employed by 16 bus companies went on strike yesterday over the government's failure to protect them against the coronavirus.

More than a thousand bus drivers have been infected with the disease and hundreds are in quarantine, as the number of cases among Israel's 9 million population has soared.

The number of infections have risen to over 67,000, with more than 2,000 new cases every day, while deaths have risen to 490. The number of cases have risen to 11,209 in the occupied West Bank, 3,714 in East Jerusalem and 75 in Gaza, with 80 deaths, all but one in the West Bank/East Jerusalem.

The overwhelming majority of these cases have occurred since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced April 19 his plans for a return to work and the reopening of schools to ensure the flow of profits to the financial and corporate elite—without any measures to guard against or deal with a renewed upsurge.

The surge is so dire that four hospitals, including Israel's largest, have run out of capacity, with Jerusalem's Hadassah hospital transferring patients to other hospitals and sending elderly and "mild" patients home.

Despite this, and the likelihood of transmission on public transport as people are forced to return to work, the government has refused to hire extra buses and drivers to prevent overcrowding, claiming the additional annual cost of \$440 million was unaffordable. While Israel has about 11,000 buses and 16,000 drivers, it would require three times the number of buses to maintain the same level of service with the recommended 20 passengers on each bus.

Most buses have no partitions around the driver's seat, despite the government's repeated promises to install them. Drivers have called on the government to

increase the number of ushers and security guards and to close the front doors of buses until barriers are installed, all to no avail.

While the government has issued regulations stating that buses can travel at about 50 percent capacity, with no more than 30 passengers on city buses, 32 on intercity lines and 50 on elongated buses, and passengers must wear masks, this is not possible and is not effectively enforced.

Although passengers are not allowed to pay with cash and must use a Rav-Kav transportation card or a bus app on their phones to reduce contact between drivers and passengers, the elderly and those living in the settlements are exempt. The bus companies had even fined their drivers for not accepting cash payments. On Monday, a labour court ruled against this, ordering the Superbus Company to cancel the fines already issued and end the practice.

Transportation Minister Miri Regev, making it clear that the government's primary concern was the bus companies' profits, said she was trying to devise a system for the elderly to travel free, with reimbursements to the bus companies, but in the meantime was working to ensure they paid with cash until negotiations are completed.

Israeli bus drivers have every right to fear for their lives. In London, where transport workers were forced to stay on the job with little if any personal protective equipment or safety measures in place even as the deadly disease ripped through the city, 34 workers employed by London bus companies have died of COVID-19, including 29 drivers. The death rates from the virus for London bus drivers far exceeded death rates for London as a whole, for most weeks from early April to early May, according to a study by University College London's Institute of Health Equity.

In New York City, 131 transit workers (rail and bus) have died from the virus and more than 4,000 have tested positive, making the Metropolitan Transportation Authority one of the hardest-hit government agencies in New York.

For decades, Israel's public services have been starved of cash, leaving the Health Ministry reliant upon army reservists, called up on emergency orders without advance notice. A few weeks ago, as hospitals reopened coronavirus wards to accommodate the ever-increasing number of patients amid a severe shortage of medical workers, nurses went on nationwide strike over low pay and staff shortages, only carrying out emergency work. Around 837 nurses and hundreds of nurses' aides were in quarantine.

The nurses' union ended the strike after the government agreed to hire an additional 2,000 nurses on a temporary basis, 400 doctors, and additional security personnel. and to establish a team to discuss long-term additions. It follows a similar strike last summer over poor working conditions, heavy caseloads, and low standards of care.

Last week, the social workers' union ended a 16-day strike of thousands who care for 1.5 million citizens living in poverty, victims of violence, at-risk children, the disabled and elderly people without family, in support of their demand for higher wages and a reduction in their burgeoning case load amid the pandemic. The union called the government's agreement to a paltry pay rise starting in July 2012, a one-off coronavirus payment, and measures to protect them from violence "a great achievement."

The situation is so bad with more than 1,000 vacancies remaining unfilled that the government has authorised work visas for care assistants from the Philippines and South Asia to fill the posts. It follows a government announcement that all social services are up for sale.

Social workers have long complained of unreasonable workloads, low wages, and the constant danger of violence. Last year, 83 percent of social workers reported violence at work, 30 percent suffered physical violence and 30 percent experienced threats to their lives or their children's lives. Social workers have protested outside Netanyahu's official residence to highlight their case load.

Both these strikes encompass Arab and Jewish

Israelis.

Last week, 100 of the 350 army reservists recruited to staff a COVID-19 call centre in the Ministry of Health walked off the job in frustration over a spike in the number of calls due to change in Health Ministry guidelines. This prompted a huge number of calls from people seeking to appeal orders to go into isolation—without entitlement to sick pay—based on cellphone tracking data from the Shin Bet security service that has proved notoriously unreliable.

These strikes are part of a growing wave of anger at the government's response to the pandemic crisis and its economic fallout. There have been weekly demonstrations in Tel Aviv calling on Netanyahu to resign.

Daily protests outside Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem have been met with methods previously reserved for the Palestinians in the occupied territories, as the police have repeatedly fired tear gas and water cannon and arrested scores of demonstrators.

This last week has seen Netanyahu's far-right supporters violently attacking protesters, and vigilante thugs have roamed the streets during and after the protests.

On Tuesday night, at a demonstration in Tel Aviv protesting in front of Public Security Minister Amir Ohana's home to protest police brutality, thugs carrying bats, broken bottles, and street signs went on the rampage, attacking the protesters.



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