

Reject whitewash report into London bus driver coronavirus deaths! For rank-and-file health and safety committees!

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A report commissioned by Transport for London (TfL) into COVID-19 deaths among London bus drivers has produced a political whitewash.

TfL announced the review on May 21, appointing University College London's (UCL) Institute of Health Equity to investigate the "operational response" of TfL to the pandemic.

As chief regulator for bus and passenger transport services—reporting to Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan—TfL presided over a catastrophic loss of life in the opening months of the pandemic. They failed to implement basic safety measures and deliberately downplayed the dangers to transport workers and passengers during the pandemic's opening months.

At least 44 TfL-regulated transport workers lost their lives to COVID-19 between March and May, including 29 bus drivers. UCL's report covers the period of March-May and focuses on the deaths of 27 drivers who worked in London from February, when the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the UK.

TfL and Khan launched the review to stem mounting anger among drivers and their families. Khan told the media, "TfL is seeking independent advice from UCL Institute of Health Equity to make sure we better understand the impact of coronavirus on our bus workers and to ensure we are taking every possible measure to protect our heroic staff."

But there was nothing independent about UCL's review. TfL did everything they could to control the review's outcome, dictating terms of reference, deciding what documents UCL's researchers would have access to, and allocating a budget of £165,000.

An internal TfL "specification" for phase one of the review, dated May 12, shows the extent of TfL's control. The 20-page document is effectively a skeleton version of the report later produced by UCL. Under the heading "Requirements," TfL wrote that "all background information" on TfL's response to the pandemic "will be provided by TfL, working with the relevant bus operators." Under the heading, "Scope," TfL states, "The commissioner (TfL) will be responsible for providing the necessary internal data, including data on bus workers, and access to workers and bus companies as appropriate."

This was like putting an accused serial killer in charge of their own trial, letting them pick the judge and select all evidence and witnesses for the prosecution.

The outcome is a 39-page report that omits critical information, and which protects powerful forces, including the bus companies, the Mayor's office, TfL executives, and the trade unions which collaborated with them.

The national lockdown and TfL

The report reveals that most bus drivers who died from COVID-19 became infected before the belated introduction of a national lockdown on March 23, "Among drivers who died, most ceased work between mid-March and early April, i.e., in the ten days either side of the lockdown on 23 March. This suggests that they became ill before the lockdown."

Fourteen of the drivers who later died went off sick in March. Twelve drivers who caught COVID-19 stopped work in April, and one in May.

"Had [the] lockdown come earlier it is likely that many fewer bus drivers would have died," authors Professor Peter Goldblatt and Dr Joana Morrison concluded.

The Johnson government's profit-driven "herd immunity" strategy and its refusal to introduce lockdown measures sooner had deadly consequences for London bus drivers and for the working class as a whole. "The study reinforces the point that lockdown is the most effective measure for reducing mortality among bus drivers; it significantly reduced passenger use of buses and hence reduced risk of infection for bus drivers as well as passengers," the authors wrote.

But TfL and Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan were not passive bystanders. They ignored warnings from the World Health Organisation and used the Johnson government's complacent and misleading public health advice to justify their own inaction. And they concealed the growing incidence of infections and illness from COVID-19 among bus and transport workers.

Despite WHO's declaration of an international health emergency on January 30, Khan and TfL claimed—throughout February, March, and April—that the risk of transmission among transport workers and passengers was "low." They rejected WHO's call for social distancing and for test, trace, and quarantine measures, insisting that handwashing was the best protection.

14 "safety actions"

UCL's report examines the timing of 14 "safety actions" by bus companies from March to early June. This timescale airbrushes TfL's actions during January and February—critical months when pandemic response measures should have been activated.

Extraordinarily, TfL's own safety actions are *not reviewed at all*, a staggering accomplishment for a review that was supposed to examine TfL's "operational response" to the pandemic!

The bus companies' "safety actions" are named as follows: "those related to vehicles (daily antiviral cleaning, enhanced cleaning, holes on assault screens, restricted access to front seats and middle door boarding), to drivers (communications, HR policies and advice, hand sanitiser, wipes

and masks) and to premises (access to toilets, enhanced cleaning, adapted premises/social distancing, health and safety/union reps stood down [from other duties] and cleaning inspections).”

UCL found, “On average, bus companies had completed 13.3 out of the 14 actions by early June.” But the review provides *zero* independent assessment or verification of these actions. UCL simply takes the bus companies and TfL at their word. As every driver knows, hand sanitiser and disinfectant wipes were regularly unavailable; “enhanced cleaning” was contradicted by filthy toilets, break facilities, and drivers’ cabins. Use of facemasks was actively opposed by bus operators, TfL and Unite. As late as April 24, TfL issued posters instructing drivers, “target numbers to limit customers on London’s buses cannot be justified.”

TfL’s failure to introduce sick pay for London’s 20,000 bus drivers until April 11 is not even mentioned. This was a death sentence for many drivers. The report shows that five infected drivers died within one week of stopping work, while eight died within two weeks. Anne Nyack, the mother of Holloway bus driver Emeka Nyack Ihenacho, who died from COVID-19 on April 4, told the press, “I only discovered after talking to my daughter that she begged him not to go to work and his words to her were: ‘If I don’t go in they are going to cut my pay.’”

It was drivers themselves who initiated the most important safety measures. When they realised their colleagues were dying, they began sealing cabin safety screens, taping off seats around the driver and implementing middle-door bus entry, defying threats of disciplinary action from the bus companies for doing so.

The bus companies’ “safety actions” were too little too late. As UCL’s study concludes, “the majority of [safety] actions were probably initiated after most of the drivers who died had become infected.”

Risk factors

Bus drivers’ high exposure to the public is cited as a likely contributor to their increased risk of death from COVID-19. The authors cite findings from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that bus drivers are at elevated risk in part due to their “arms-length” proximity to passengers—they score 75 on a scale ranging from 0–100 (nurses have a proximity score of 90).

But the report finds that occupational exposure is just one of many risk factors for drivers. These include, “age, living in areas characterised by deprivation, having a high proportion of members of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups; and the presence of underlying health conditions.”

Most of these risks are “out of the control of bus operators,” the authors declare. But the ruthless exploitation of drivers by global transport companies such as ComfortDelGro and Tower Transit has fuelled these dangers, leaving drivers vulnerable to infection and death.

Underlying health conditions (UHCs) are a case in point. The authors explain these have “long been associated with bus driving as a sedentary occupation and likely contributed to the severity of their COVID-19 infection.” High rates of coronary heart disease and hypertension (high blood pressure) were discovered among London bus drivers during the 1950s and 1960s, the authors recount. But half a century later, drivers are working longer shifts, with shorter break times and no conductors. In 2019, Loughborough University’s bus driver fatigue study found 36 percent of London bus drivers had a “close call” due to exhaustion in the previous 12 months.

These conditions are not just stressful, they are deadly. They help create problems such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, known risk factors (co-morbidities) for COVID-19. Seventeen London

bus drivers who died from COVID-19 had one or more UHC, the report finds. In 7 out of 13 death certificates examined by UCL, high blood pressure was identified by a certifying doctor as a factor contributing to death.

The issue is class, not race

At TfL’s request, in line with state efforts to promote racial politics, much of the report focuses on the high rate of infection among BAME drivers. This is being cynically used by TfL and Khan as a means of dividing bus drivers, suppressing a united class response, and deflecting attention from their own criminal actions.

The report’s findings in fact point to the primary role of social, economic and class factors in the deaths of BAME drivers.

Among the London drivers who died, 73 percent were from BAME backgrounds. This reflects the multiracial and multi-ethnic character of the workforce—52 percent of London bus drivers are BAME. The report found 41 percent of drivers who died were black, 33 percent were Asian, and 22 percent were white. In raw numbers, 6 white drivers died, 9 Asian drivers died, and 11 black drivers died. (An ethnic category for the remaining driver was not available).

Drilling down further, the report provides “detailed ethnicity categories” for drivers who died, but this serves to highlight the arbitrary and absurd character of such racial classifications. A chart shows that five “Asian other unknown” drivers died, and that two “White British” and two “Black Caribbean” bus drivers died. It shows that four “White other unknown” drivers died, double the combined number of “Asian Indian” and “Asian Pakistani” deaths. What are workers supposed to make of any of this?

Drivers did not die because of their skin colour, they died because they are part of the working class. Like so many other key workers—including NHS and social care staff, warehouse and delivery workers—their lives are expendable under capitalism. The report explains “Black African” drivers suffered the highest number of COVID-19 deaths in London. This correlates with high COVID-19 mortality rates for black men across England and Wales. But these deaths are not a product of racial, but of social characteristics, with a high proportion of BAME workers living in socially deprived areas.

A massive 74 percent of London bus drivers who died from COVID-19 lived in neighbourhoods with above-average social deprivation, and 48 percent came from Local Authority areas with the highest rates of infection in London. Across England and Wales, the authors reported “deprivation inequality” was the single most important factor in COVID-19 deaths, finding that “poor outcomes remain after adjusting for ethnicity.”

This class divide was felt *within* ethnic groups. For example, black males in the poorest areas died from the virus at more than double the rate of black males in the wealthiest areas.

Did London bus drivers catch COVID-19 at work?

For months, the bus companies, TfL, and Unite have actively concealed the presence of COVID-19 infections and deaths at London bus garages. The report confirms the number of deaths from COVID-19 at each of London’s bus companies. Metrolink, GoAhead and Tower Transit accounted for the majority of deaths—19 out of the 27 (see Table 2.3).

Metroline and Tower Transit also recorded a higher percentage of positive tests for COVID-19 than other large bus companies. But no figures are supplied for the total number of tests, so this information is largely meaningless.

UCL's report does not reveal the number of infections and deaths from COVID-19 *at each garage*. Without this information, including the likely date of infection, it is impossible to establish whether drivers became infected at their place of work.

Information pieced together by bus safety campaigner Tom Kearney and by WSWs, shows that four bus workers died at Westbourne Park garage, two from Holloway garage, two from Greenford garage, and two from Lea Valley Interchange. UCL's report is silent on these workplace clusters.

On May 22, former TfL board member Michael Liebreich wrote to UCL's Professor Sir Michael Marmot (reportedly heading the review) saying it was "almost a given" the drivers had been infected at their place of work. Liebreich's view carries weight. He served on TfL's board between 2012 and 2018 in safety-related roles, later describing London's passenger transport system as "institutionally unsafe."

Freedom of Information denied

Throughout April, as bereaved family members raised the alarm over the growing death toll, the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened to expose the cover-up. On April 21, WSWs submitted four questions to the Mayor's office and TfL, asking for: "1) The number of bus drivers and TfL staff who have died from COVID-19? 2) The number of bus drivers and TfL staff who have been hospitalised with COVID-19? 3) The number of bus drivers and TfL staff off sick at home with symptoms consistent with COVID-19? and 4) The name of all bus garages where confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported and the number of cases at each garage."

Two days later, TfL Commissioner Mike Brown issued a statement revealing there had been 29 deaths at TfL's contracted bus, rail, and underground services. But TfL refused to provide any further details, and the Mayor's office was silent. On April 23, WSWs reported, "This suppression of information has life and death consequences. In the absence of data about the location of confirmed COVID-19 cases—and the denial of testing for all drivers reporting ill—it is impossible for contact tracing to take place to identify workers and members of the public at risk or to enact preventive measures to protect lives."

The cover-up continued. On May 12, Kearney submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to TfL, asking for "a detailed list of all incidents of London Transport Worker Fatalities from Covid-19" among bus, rail, underground and light rail staff. He asked for the date of each reported death and the work location; the name of the TfL division, contractor or agency employing each victim; and the TfL executive title responsible for the service. His FOI request was refused, with TfL's General Counsel claiming it would be too expensive to process.

On July 23, Khan refused to say how many TfL workers were hospitalised, or on sick-leave due to COVID-19, "Neither Transport for London nor its partner organisations hold information on the number of transport workers who have been hospitalised due to coronavirus related illness."

One day after UCL's "independent review" into bus driver deaths was announced, Kearney submitted an FOI request to TfL for the review's terms of reference, key milestones and associated correspondence and minutes. His FOI request was refused.

Unite's collusion on bus driver deaths

UCL's report conceals the dangerous workplace environment being

policed at London bus garages by Unite.

On April 10, WSWs reported the views of bus drivers across London. "Every driver is angry," one driver said. "Every one of them, but we can't do anything because the union has signed off on this and done nothing whatsoever." Another driver said, "The union is not making any noise about what's going on. People are worried because four of the workers who are dead are from my company, Metroline."

That same day, drivers received letters jointly signed by Unite, TfL, and the bus companies, pledging "industrial harmony," giving excuses for the lack of hand sanitiser, and instructing workers that facemasks were "not recommended." Unite was being exposed as an embedded union, colluding with the bus companies and the Labour Mayor.

On April 21, a Unite spokesperson told WSWs they were "not collecting" information or "keeping an actual tally" of deaths, hospitalisations, or the location of illnesses from COVID-19, saying it was "not our responsibility."

Unite health and safety reps told drivers this information could not be revealed because of "data protection." In fact, the Information Commissioners Office provided clear grounds for employers to disclose information about workplace infections. Its guidance stated, "You should keep staff informed about potential or confirmed COVID-19 cases amongst their colleagues."

On June 19, Caroline Pidgeon, Liberal-Democrat in the London Assembly, posed the following question to Khan during Mayor's question time: "Please provide me with the exact dates and locations of scheduled inspections, unannounced spot checks and audits that TfL has undertaken since March 2020 of (a) bus depots to ensure that bus companies were policing social distancing between drivers and routes (b) toilet facilities to ensure they really were cleaned, and that soap and hand sanitiser were freely available and (c) buses and depots to ensure that enhanced cleaning of vehicles and rest/meal rooms was actually carried out."

Khan's reply is a searing indictment of Unite: "Any significant issues concerning safety, toilet provision and cleaning have been raised at network conference calls, which the operators and TfL senior bus officers dial into, and at regular calls with Unite representatives. This has enabled the issues to be worked through on a day-to-day basis. During a public health crisis, this is a more agile way to highlight and resolve problems as and when they occur."

In other words, inspections weren't needed as Unite could be relied on to rubber-stamp all company actions!

Responding to UCL's report on July 27, TfL also emphasised the importance of its close working relationship with Unite: "The frequency of the tripartite meetings between TfL, bus operators and Unite the Union were also increased to weekly to ensure a collaborative approach to issues. These meetings were in addition to those held at an Operator level between the company and their local Unite representatives and Full Time Officers."

TfL explained that all its measures were introduced, "following regular dialogue with Unite the Union full time officials at a tripartite level, as well as within each organisation with the Unite local representatives and Officers."

Unite's corporatist partnership with TfL and the bus companies facilitated 33 bus worker deaths.

For rank-and-file safety committees

Stage one of UCL's review ends with meaningless recommendations for "early interventions on ill-health prevention" and "strategies to empower BAME staff to raise concerns about occupational and risk

safety.”

Stage two will reportedly make further recommendations on workplace safety, at the end of 2020. The entire review is an exercise in box ticking, political coverup, and complacency. The authors conclude, “There is scope for TfL to develop clear guidance on rapid and simultaneous implementation of measures *in the event of spikes of infection in London or increased infection rates among staff*” [emphasis added].

Bus and transport workers cannot wait for another spike in infections. The Johnson government’s premature lifting of lockdown restrictions, necessitating public transport use, is already producing a growth in infections.

Even as the last funerals were being held in May for bus drivers killed by COVID-19, Unite was issuing press statements supporting the return to front-door passenger entry and promoting claims that drivers would be protected by new cabin safety screens. Safe passenger limits have been lifted and there is little-to-no enforcement of face masks. The union actively denigrates their use by drivers, falsely claiming there is “little evidence” to show they offer protection.

The union’s corporatist alliance with TfL, Mayor Khan, and the bus companies, which places operational efficiency, i.e., profits, above the lives of workers and passengers, must be rejected. Action must be taken now to prevent illness and loss of life. Rank-and-file safety committees must be elected at every workplace, ensuring that drivers’ health, safety, and lives take precedence over profit.

The Socialist Equality Party advances the following demands:

- Regular COVID-19 tests at every garage, with contact tracing and quarantine overseen by qualified NHS staff, not private contractors like SERCO.

- Immediate mandatory reporting of all COVID-19 infections, including date and garage location. TfL and bus company executives have no right to keep this information secret!

- Vulnerable workers to be shielded on full pay. All those with underlying health conditions or at risk due to age, must be protected!

- Temperature testing at all garages before sign-on. Drivers must reject TfL’s claims that temperature tests are not “scientific” – they are only trying to save money. PPE, wipes, and hand sanitiser to be given to every worker at the start of their shift, with enough to last the day.

- Management harassment of sick employees must end! Workers with symptoms or taking care of sick relatives should receive full pay until they have recovered.

- End the practice of long shifts and the normalisation of driver fatigue! Shift times must be reduced during the pandemic to no more than 8 hours a day, with no loss of pay. Drivers’ immune systems must be protected from the debilitating effects of exhaustion. If management says this is impossible, then rank-and-file committees must take over rostering at each garage. The profits of Metroline, GoAhead, and Arriva are more than enough to pay for this necessary safety measure.

- Thousands of extra staff must be employed to enforce social distancing and safe passenger limits on buses. Additional cleaning staff must treat touch points with anti-viral chemicals at the end of each rounder. All cleaning staff to be fully protected with PPE and hazardous waste equipment.

- Rank-and-file committees must call on epidemiologists and other scientific experts, to review airflow patterns and other risk factors on buses. Safety recommendations must be based on scientific knowledge not tailored to the profit interests of the companies. This information must be shared with scientists, bus drivers, and passengers internationally to help combat the pandemic.

We urge all bus and transport workers who see the necessity for these measures to contact us today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact