

Alarm bells as London bus driver tests positive for COVID-19

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Bus company Metroline is forcing drivers at a London garage to report for duty despite their colleague being diagnosed with COVID-19.

Several drivers were handed “contact tracing” letters at Cricklewood garage on Thursday, stating, “We are contacting you to inform you that an employee with confirmed Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) may have come into contact with you within the last 14 days.”

The infected driver reportedly drove the 112 bus route that travels from North Finchley to Ealing Broadway, via Brentcross shopping centre.

The letter from Metroline’s Head of Human Resources Darren Hill stated, “If you are well, there is no action for you to take.”

It continued, “If you develop symptoms of cough or fever or shortness of breath, you should immediately stay indoors and avoid contact with other people” and “call NHS 111 to inform them that you are a contact of a confirmed case of COVID-19.”

As of Friday, neither Metroline nor Unite had issued any statement to alert more than 500 drivers at Cricklewood about the reappearance of COVID-19. After 33 bus workers were killed by coronavirus between March and May—including the death of Cricklewood driver Ishrat Ali—Unite’s suppression of information is criminal.

According to eyewitnesses, one driver who received the letter on Thursday immediately reported feeling unwell. He was told to book his own test and sat for more than three hours in the “output” area where drivers sign on, potentially infecting dozens more people. He had already completed part of his duty. He subsequently tested negative.

The Unite rep at the garage met with management but took no steps to protect workers’ health and safety. The union issued no demand that drivers be sent home with

immediate access to COVID-19 tests, in keeping with their corporatist collusion with Transport for London (TfL) and the bus companies.

“The driver took the correct decision to go home,” a driver from Cricklewood told the WSWs, “but he was put under enormous pressure by management and also by the union to stay and finish his duty. He stood his ground and quite rightly so. If it’s happening at Cricklewood it could be happening at other garages, not just Metroline. We’ve already lost Ali, we can’t let this happen again.”

The outbreak at Cricklewood raises urgent issues. Once again drivers are being infected with COVID-19 and once again their colleagues are being kept in the dark.

On Friday, WSWs contacted TfL and Metroline asking that they confirm the number of new COVID-19 infections and hospitalisations among London transport workers. They refused to provide this information.

Last week, Andy Byford, TfL’s new transport commissioner, told the *Evening Standard*, “I believe passionately that the system is safe to use.” Byford’s assurances are worthless. As subway chief in New York City he presided over carnage, with at least 146 transit workers dead from COVID-19.

Refusing to answer questions from WSWs about the latest workplace infection, Metroline issued the following statement, “We have introduced extensive and comprehensive measures to ensure a COVID-19 secure workplace in accordance with Government Guidance, working closely with Unite the Union and utilising NHS Test and Trace to protect our employees and keep them safe.”

The extent of Unite’s collaboration with the bus companies was revealed in July by London’s Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. In a response during Mayor’s

Question Time, he explained that TfL was not conducting any on-site safety inspections because “any significant concerns can be raised at regular network conference calls or separately between Unite the union and TfL.” Such meetings took place on a “day-to-day basis.”

Metroline’s “extensive and comprehensive measures” in collusion with Unite were a death sentence for workers. The company accounted for 38 percent of COVID-19 deaths among London bus drivers between March and May. The “contact trace” letters they distributed last week told drivers, “Please follow this advice until 27th August, even if your symptoms are minor”—but the letters were handed out on September 3!

Metroline refused to disclose what criteria they used to determine the risk of transmission to other employees. They have reportedly only contacted drivers on route 112, yet all drivers clock on from the same “output” area and use the same rest and toilet break facilities. The risk of widespread workplace transmission among transport workers and passengers cannot be overstated.

As with workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 among warehouse and food processing workers, the NHS Track and Trace system has proven to be dysfunctional—and this is deliberate. Employers are effectively handed unlimited discretion over who will be informed and when.

The sole concern of TfL and the transport companies is to ramp up revenue and profit. The Johnson government’s reopening of the economy, and its entire “herd immunity” strategy, is forcing millions into unsafe workplaces, public transport and schools to protect the obscene wealth of the financial oligarchy.

The response to the pandemic must be taken out of the hands of the ruling class. Workers must elect rank-and-file safety committees in all garages and take immediate measures to protect health, safety and lives. We urge all drivers who want to discuss this fight to contact the International Transport Workers Newsletter



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: