

London bus drivers launch rank-and-file safety committee to fight renewed threat from COVID-19

The London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
16 September 2020

The following resolution to establish the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee was adopted by a meeting of bus drivers on Sunday September 13. The committee's launch follows the tragic deaths of 33 London bus workers from COVID-19 and amid news of new infections at the Cricklewood garage being concealed by the bus companies, Transport for London and Unite the union.

Brothers and sisters,

We have formed the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee to wage a fight for the protection of our lives against the spread of COVID-19.

Events at Cricklewood garage over the last week demonstrate this cannot be entrusted to the bus companies, Transport for London, or Unite the union.

Once more we have been kept in the dark about a confirmed case of COVID-19 affecting one of our colleagues and the risk of transmission it poses.

No briefings have been organised and no mass testing arranged. Neither Metroline nor Unite issued any statement to alert the garage's more than 500 drivers. Instead, the company has been given a blank cheque to decide which drivers will be notified about COVID-19 infections and when, in order to avoid "disruption" and to ensure "operational efficiency."

At least one driver who received a "contact tracing" letter on September 3 was pressured to work, despite reporting ill. When he stood his ground, saying he intended to book off, he was threatened with loss of wages, told to book his own test and left to sit in the output area for nearly three hours, despite the risk of exposure to others. These criminally negligent actions were backed by the Unite safety representative. The driver eventually tested negative, but the company's disregard for safety demonstrates how we are all being put at risk.

We have already lost our respected colleague and friend Ishrat Ali, whose children and wife are still mourning. Ali is one of 33 bus workers who died from COVID-19 between March and May. This cannot happen again!

Independent action is needed because the trade unions work on behalf of the companies and the government in suppressing opposition from below. During the first wave of the pandemic, as COVID-19 was killing drivers, Unite joined with TfL and the bus companies to insist that PPE was "not recommended," pledging "industrial harmony." Members who criticised Unite's actions were suspended from the union.

Like our brothers and sisters in the NHS, on the railways and London Underground, in supermarkets and food processing, warehouse and logistics, we have worked on the "frontline" during this pandemic. But despite the phoney tributes to key workers from politicians and the media, we are not "all in this together." Our lives are viewed as more expendable than the diesel in the buses. Our bodies are exhausted from working long and dangerous back-to-back shifts that leave us vulnerable to infection and death. Drivers previously shielded due to underlying health conditions are being forced back to work, even as infection rates across England double each week.

Our fight goes beyond the bus garage. The actions of Metroline and TfL are part of the Johnson government's return to work and unsafe reopening of schools that is forcing millions onto crowded transport. How many of those being crowded today onto buses, trains and the underground, will end up in the weeks and months ahead on a hospital ventilator or in overflowing morgues?

We say: Our lives and safety are non-negotiable! Our loyalty is not to the billionaire shareholders who own the major transport companies but to our fellow workers, their

families, and the travelling public whose lives are being endangered through corporate negligence. Nothing will change unless we decide to change it, and for this to happen we must act as one!

The London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee resolves to fight for the following immediate demands:

- Immediate on-site testing and contact tracing for all staff at the garage. All staff required to self-isolate must be paid a full wage.
- No more cover-ups! Immediate disclosure of all infections as soon as the company is informed, with immediate notification to drivers by SMS and company app.
- No victimisations! All staff must be free to speak out on safety concerns and to share information with their colleagues, including on social media, without management and union reprisals.

The situation we confront is being replicated around the country in workplaces, factories, offices and schools. A resurgence of the pandemic is underway, prepared by the homicidal policy of the Johnson government and summed up in the brutal term “herd immunity.”

We are not cattle and will not be sacrificed to protect the profits of the corporations and banks who have made a financial killing during the pandemic. Against the Johnson government, and its backers in the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, we make our appeal to the working class.

We call on fellow bus and transport workers at garages in London and beyond to stand with us in this fight. Help establish a network of rank-and-file committees to take this fight forward.

Motion adopted, September 13, 2020



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