

London bus drivers challenge Metroline over new COVID-19 infections at Cricklewood garage

Our reporters
29 September 2020

Members of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee have issued an open letter to Metroline over the re-emergence of COVID-19 at Cricklewood garage in north-west London.

In a letter to Managing Director Steven Harris last Thursday, the drivers set out major safety breaches by the company. The letter was also sent to Yang Ban Seng, MD/Group CEO for parent company ComfortDelGro in Singapore.

Metroline has deliberately concealed information about the infection of a driver and an engineer's apprentice at the garage in recent weeks, the drivers say, placing hundreds of lives at risk.

In May, Cricklewood driver Ishrat Ali died from COVID-19 and two more drivers were hospitalised, one of whom was placed on a ventilator.

"We have already lost our friend and colleague, Ishrat Ali who worked at this garage for 28 years. We are not prepared to accept another preventable death," the drivers write in their letter.

Eight drivers and other staff at Cricklewood caught COVID-19 over that period, according to data obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site*, with clusters of infection also present at Greenford, Holloway and Potters Bar.

Metroline had the highest number of bus drivers who died from COVID-19 between March and May, accounting for 38 percent of all deaths, despite employing just 16 percent of London bus drivers, according to figures compiled by bus safety campaigner Tom Kearney.

The drivers are calling for urgent safety measures to prevent the further spread of infection. Their letter, below, is published in full. It is followed by comments from drivers who are members of the newly formed rank-and-file safety committee uniting drivers from garages across London.

Open Letter to Metroline from Cricklewood members of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee

In recent weeks we have been made aware that at least two of our colleagues at Cricklewood bus garage have tested positive for COVID-19.

Metroline has chosen not to inform more than 500 drivers and other bus workers of these confirmed COVID-19 infections. No briefings or notifications were issued across the garage via the company's app and SMS. Concerned members of staff have brought this to our attention, knowing that their workplace is not COVID-19 secure.

Three weeks have passed since drivers were informed that a colleague on the 112 had tested positive for COVID-19. Metroline's "contact tracing" letter to just a handful of drivers stated that "no action" was needed unless they were experiencing symptoms. This is not good enough. In the absence of testing, drivers who are asymptomatic might unwittingly transmit

COVID-19 to others. One driver on another route was only handed Metroline's letter after he had already begun his duty. He was instructed by management to remain in the output area for three hours while he attempted to arrange a test. This clearly constituted a risk of transmission to other staff at the garage, yet this action was agreed by a representative of Unite. No warning was issued to all drivers in the depot, not even to all drivers on the 112 route.

We have subsequently learned that an engineer apprentice tested positive for COVID-19—again without the Cricklewood workforce being notified. There is zero evidence of containment measures being implemented.

We have already lost our friend and colleague, Ishrat Ali, who worked at this garage for 28 years. We are not prepared to accept another preventable death.

We demand the following measures are undertaken immediately by Metroline:

1. Report to all workers the real number of existing infections at Cricklewood and establish a protocol for the immediate notification of all staff whenever a new infection is reported to Metroline.

2. Conduct a comprehensive track-and-trace operation to determine which of our colleagues came into contact with infected workers and put them on paid leave until they are given a clean bill of health.

3. Beginning with these workers, test all Cricklewood staff for COVID-19.

Metroline's duty-of-care extends to its passengers. We are gravely concerned about a wider risk of virus transmission, especially as drivers have been instructed that social distancing does not apply to school bus services even as hundreds of schools have already reported infections among pupils and teachers.

Metroline has a legal responsibility to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees. The staff at Cricklewood has the legal right to work in an environment in which they are not confronted with the risk of serious and imminent danger under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

We await your response to the urgent risk mitigation measures which we have outlined.

Thursday September 24, 2020

London bus drivers spoke to the WSWs about the open letter they have issued and why they have joined the London Bus Drivers Rank-and File Safety Committee. Names have been changed to prevent victimisation.

Anton from Cricklewood said, “I’ve been working for Metroline for nearly 20 years and the fact that the company is not informing us about employees in our garage who have tested positive for COVID-19 is totally out of order and it feels like our lives don’t matter.

“The government has completely let us key workers down, all through the pandemic—from not providing PPE [personal protective equipment] for NHS staff, to not prioritising testing.

“The unions have let us down the most. They are not fighting to protect the lives of all employees who they are meant to represent. I have lost faith in Unite, the union. Over the years I have seen the company implement any changes they desire without the union doing anything to help the workers.

“The company, TFL and the government have done the bare minimum to protect workers’ lives—we are viewed as collateral damage in keeping the economy going.

“The pandemic and the way the government has handled this situation, shows that once again the lives of the working class and middle class are deemed expendable to the rich. The re-opening of schools is all about getting the parents back to work.

“It’s simple, the [high] *R* [Reproduction] rate and those most infected are in more deprived areas of this country where most people live from paycheck to paycheck.

“More needs to be done to protect drivers’ lives and I believe the rank-and-file committee is the only way we can do this. I encourage all working class people to do whatever they can to protect themselves and their families. If the unions are doing nothing, then maybe the rank-and-file safety committee is the option we need to follow.”

Richard, another driver from Cricklewood explained, “I haven’t heard anything from management. I haven’t heard about the engineer’s apprentice testing positive, but I did hear from colleagues about the driver. I had been on the same route for almost two weeks as the 112 driver prior to the [contact tracing] letter sent out to other drivers, but I haven’t received anything. They definitely don’t care about the spare drivers.

“My response to the denial of infections and the fact that a driver was told to wait so long in a communal area to arrange a test by the management, and the union complied with this, is that I want to resign as a union member.

“I am terrified. I really don’t know what to do. Right now, they say the drivers cab is fully sealed, but I can see that the seals on the cabin have not been done properly. When we put on the heaters, they still exchange air with the passengers’ area. Before the warm air goes to the driver’s cabin, it passes through the passenger compartment.

“The demands we have put forward is because the company are not informing us of anything. On the one hand they are telling us not to wear a mask, and then the other day they told us to wear a mask. Some of the garages have a form of testing. They test the temperature at the entrance to the garage, but then the other garages don’t have anything at all.

“We have issued the open letter because of the inaction of the union. In fact, it would be more correct to say the blatant action of the union and its compliance with the company instead of the well-being of the drivers.

“A lot of drivers are tired of Unite. I know a lot of drivers resigned recently from being union members following discussions about the health and safety issues, but also remote sign-on and other problems. The recent strike ballot by Unite is because of how many drivers started to resign from being members.

“The union’s ballot for strike action does not address what drivers feel are the main issues. The major concerns of drivers right now are the cases of coronavirus and the fear of passengers about the virus.

“Social distancing is non-existent. Signs have been placed in canteens and social rooms saying there can’t be more than two or three drivers, when on a break there are 15. Officially there is a policy about the wearing of masks in communal areas, but as always there’s a ‘but’ to it.

Drivers are being booked and face disciplinary action if they are not wearing a mask and have to explain themselves why they have done this, but managers can go without wearing a mask. If drivers complain about this, they are being booked again and sent to management to explain their situation.

“I joined the rank-and-file safety committee because I think that the union is not doing anything, and I believe that this will allow me to have a say about what the problem is, and will be listened to, rather than being told by the union.

“I think the drivers should go on strike. The company knows that the drivers want to go on strike, which is why there is the ballot in the union right now to prevent us from doing this.

“I see that this is a workers’ struggle. We are being told that this is a bus workers’ struggle or that it’s bus drivers’ issue, or that it’s a teachers’ issue. But we are all facing the same problems, and this is an issue for all of us.

“I hope that the drivers will be supported by other workers, and also the drivers will support others, when their time comes.”

Michael from Holloway explained, “I’ve been a member of Unite on and off, as I don’t feel they represent us properly. They are happy to agree with whatever the company wants. I feel robbed by the union, taking our cash weekly, but doing nothing. We never receive the necessary support, especially through the pandemic.

“Before the pandemic we had a ballot for strike action over driver fatigue with a vote in favour, but nothing was done. Driver fatigue has become worse during the pandemic. Every driver is feeling it.

“I’ve made comments on online sources with Unite, but they never take the views of drivers into account and they ended up deleting me from any social media groups.

“I’ve lost many friends to COVID-19, which hurts, especially a friend I knew for 30 years at Holloway garage. Now I hear the news from Cricklewood garage that drivers and engineers are made to work without being tested even though their colleagues have tested positive. Profits are deemed more important than the lives of bus drivers.

“I have been looking for something like the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee for a long time. I feel we can make a stand and maybe be listened to for a change and hopefully get support and fight for better working conditions.

“I would like to encourage as many bus drivers as possible to sign up to the committee. Hopefully we can grow as we need to stick together rather than waiting on any union to help us, or TFL, or our own bus company. To me it feels like the serial killers have been put in charge.”



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