

As COVID-19 claims the life of London bus driver Kofi Opoku, Unite mounts fake “safety campaign” to stem drivers’ anger

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Unite the union has announced it will “escalate its campaign for stricter COVID-19 safety measures” on London buses, following the death from coronavirus of 55-year-old Croydon bus driver Kofi Opoku.

Opoku, a popular and longstanding driver, died on October 5. He is the 35th London bus worker to die from COVID-19 since March. Opoku’s death takes place amid a second wave of infections among drivers and engineers which are being concealed by the bus companies, Transport for London (TfL), and Unite.

Unite claims it has introduced “significant” safety measures. But if that is the case, why are drivers still dying? Since the onset of the pandemic Unite has colluded with the transport companies, TfL, and Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan to cover-up infections, minimise service disruptions, downplay risk, and deny drivers the most basic protections, including PPE.

Unite’s “renewed” safety campaign is a fraud. It is a response to the political challenge issued by the newly formed London Bus Drivers Rank and File Safety Committee (RAFSC). The rank-and-file committee was established on September 13 in opposition to Unite’s pro-company agenda that has produced a health and safety catastrophe.

On September 24, committee members at Cricklewood garage issued an open letter warning drivers that a second wave of infections had begun and calling for urgent action to save lives. The letter documented efforts by Metroline and Unite to conceal COVID-19 infections at the garage, placing hundreds of lives at risk.

The committee demanded: 1) immediate notification to drivers of all new infections via the company app; 2) immediate on-site testing and contact-tracing with full

pay for those self-isolating; and 3) an end to victimisations. The letter was sent to Metroline CEO Stephen Harris, ComfortDelGro’s CEO Yang Ban Seng, and was CC’d to Unite Regional Officer Peter Kavanagh and Unite Lead Officer for Buses John Murphy.

Unite officials claimed the rank-and-file committee was a “fake committee” spreading “fake news”. Just one day earlier, on September 23, Unite reps gate-crashed the committee’s weekly online meeting, seeking to disrupt the agenda and gather information on attendees. This failed, with drivers attacking Unite’s record of inaction and collusion on driver fatigue and COVID-19.

Within 24 hours of the Cricklewood open letter, Kavanagh emailed Unite members announcing a list of “enhanced” safety demands in a clear attempt at damage control. Four days later, on September 29, the union rushed into secret talks with Metroline and TfL. The meeting was attended by Sinisa Cica (Unite London Area Convenor), Sarah Cook (Unite Regional Officer), and Murphy. The open letter at Cricklewood was undoubtedly top of the agenda. Unite has refused to disclose the content of their joint discussions.

Unite’s safety demands are not aimed at protecting lives. The union is seizing on a second wave of COVID-19 to deepen its corporatist partnership with TfL and the bus companies. Such is their demand for a “Pan-London health and safety committee (Tripartite)” and a “Weekly H&S meeting between Union and Management”. Unite officials already meet with TfL on a twice-weekly basis, approving bus operators’ unsafe practices against drivers in the name of “operational efficiency”.

In May this year, Unite rammed through a return to normal rosters as part of the Johnson government's ending of the national lockdown. This involved the resumption of fare collection and front-door passenger entry as a precondition for receiving bailout funds from Westminster. Unite supported TfL's "phased return" to normal service, claiming drivers would be protected by cabin "safety screens", passenger limits, daily inspection of buses, and "enhanced" cleaning.

Four months later and not a single one of these measures has been properly implemented.

Unite's "enhanced" safety demands include, "No bus with a damaged seal to be used in service". But contrary to claims by TfL and Unite, the "safety seals" on drivers' cabins were not designed by scientists at University College London. They were a cheap measure introduced to try and convince drivers that front-door entry would be safe. Unite has repeatedly told drivers that face masks are not necessary because their cabins are "sealed", with not a shred of evidence to support such claims.

The same goes for Unite's demand that safety reps be "stood down" (taken off driving duties) to guarantee "safe working practices". Full-time safety reps already exist at many garages, but this has done nothing to protect drivers. At Cricklewood, the full-time safety rep has pressured sick drivers to work and denied the existence of COVID-19 infections, despite management issuing contact-tracing letters!

Unite's real attitude to safety is exposed by its campaign of slander and censorship against the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Over the past fortnight, statements from the committee posted on Facebook and WhatsApp groups were deleted by Unite officials. On the London Bus Drivers Facebook group, with over 4,000 members, Unite official Joanne Harris deleted the Cricklewood open letter and used her position as a Facebook moderator to block a follow-up statement by the committee, "For a London-wide strike to oppose the threat to life from COVID-19!"

Bus drivers reacted angrily to Harris's censorship, and the group's administrators and moderators took the principled decision to remove her from the group and uphold the democratic rights of members to free and open debate. After it was reposted, the open letter was read by more than 3,000 bus drivers.

A former Labour Party functionary, Harris is Vice

Chair of the United Left faction of Unite. She is a Corbyn supporter, whose Facebook page features photos of herself posing with Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey and former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. This is a telling illustration of how the Corbynites act in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle.

After the death of Kofi Opoku, Unite launched a major PR campaign. The *Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Huffington Post* and *Sun* have all published articles this past week promoting Unite's empty promises on safety and portraying Unite official John Murphy as some kind of working class hero. Not a single journalist has exposed Unite's criminal collaboration with TfL, Khan, and the bus companies, and their joint responsibility for the deaths of London bus drivers.

No doubt senior figures in Unite and the London Mayor's office are fearful over the emergence of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee represents a conscious challenge to the "herd immunity" agenda of the Johnson government being enforced by Labour and the Trades Union Congress. It is winning support.

For this reason, Unite has turned to its "little helpers" in the pseudo-left Socialist Party. On Friday, Unite posted a video featuring newly reinstated Walworth garage rep and Socialist Party member Moe Manir calling on drivers to get behind Unite's current strike ballot at Metroline over remote sign-on. Needless to say, Manir said nothing about the spread of COVID-19 infections at garages across London or of Unite's criminal role in concealing them with TfL and the bus companies.



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