

Three more bus drivers die in Britain as Covid-19 surges

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Three more bus drivers have died in the UK from COVID-19, this time in Leeds, West Yorkshire and Kilmarnock, Scotland. The Leeds drivers were from the same depot, while the death in Kilmarnock was also part of a workplace cluster.

Andy Powell, 52, died on November 1, and Nazrul Hussain (age unknown), died on October 19. Both were based at the Hunslet Park depot in south Leeds operated by First West Yorkshire.

Powell leaves behind a wife and family, including a grandson. He went off sick October 5, having tested positive for COVID-19, and had been “in and out of hospital since then” according to a company email cited in the *Yorkshire Post*.

Hussain, who lost his brother to COVID-19 earlier this year, is survived by five children. A company email stated, “Whilst he had been absent from work with an apparent sickness bug for about a week, the cause of death has now been diagnosed as COVID.”

First West Yorkshire told the *Post*, “The safety and welfare of colleagues and passengers remains our utmost priority”. It cited a “range of measures at its depots to help protect the safety of staff and customers.”

These claims were refuted by an employee who told the *Post* “around 50 staff were off sick with confirmed or suspected Covid-19.”

A COVID-19 outbreak has also been confirmed at First Bus Leeds’ Bramley depot. *Leeds-live* quoted a company spokesperson on November 3 saying, “From our workforce of nearly 500 at the Bramley depot, we have eight members of staff including four drivers who are currently self-isolating after a positive Covid test.”

At Stagecoach West Scotland’s Kilmarnock depot, a bus driver died from COVID-19 on October 11. Willie Wallace was taken ill October 3, and went into self-

isolation before being hospitalised on October 9. He leaves behind two daughters and four grandchildren.

Wallace had worked for Stagecoach since 1987 and was previously employed at Liddell’s Coaches in Auchinleck and another coach firm, Milligans of Mauchline.

Several bus drivers at the same Kilmarnock depot have tested positive for the virus. According to the *Scottish Sun* the first case was reported on October 4 and nine other workers had tested positive for the virus by October 12.

A company spokesman told the *STV news* website the cases were “not linked” and there was “no evidence of workplace transmission.” But a *Sun* article published October 12 exposes these claims as a cover-up.

Headlined “Five Stagecoach drivers catch Covid-19 after bus firm ‘failed to make them isolate or take test’”, the article quotes an insider: “Last Sunday [October 4] we had the first case of coronavirus in the depot where a driver came to work. Since last Sunday we’ve now had five drivers confirmed as having coronavirus and sadly one passed away. I’m very concerned... he came to work and got his result back while he was driving. To me, that driver shouldn’t have been working driving a bus while waiting for a test result.

“He’s been in contact with 10-40 drivers on that day, none of us have been self-isolating and the company has not told us to. When we asked the question, we got no answers. Willie was a lovely, gentle person. He was tremendous, a gentle giant basically. It’s very sad and to be perfectly honest and yesterday when we found out it put a right dampener on the situation because people aren’t wearing face masks and they’re flouting the law—it’s terrible.

“The company saying it’s not a work-related issue,

how can it not be work related? Nobody else has gone for any tests, there's no self-isolation or anything. We're all frustrated.”

The driver also expressed concern over the lack of information for passengers, “I wouldn't say we're brushing it under the carpet, but it looks that way. At the end of the day, we're public transport, we serve the public, they have a right to know.

“Most of the drivers think these rules in place aren't sufficient enough. A lot of people are not abiding by the rules. I think that's the same over the board—supermarkets are feeling the same. I think we are at the forefront of it, as soon as you open doors to the bus, people are coming right up to the screen. OK the screens are up, the holes are all taped off, but there's still potential for that virus to come through, there's plenty space for it to come through. A lot of the drivers were saying we need to take the approach—'you don't wear a mask you don't get on' because we're the first contacts of all the people.”

Kilmarnock, a town of nearly 50,000 inhabitants, is the second largest town in Ayrshire and sits within the National Health Service's Ayrshire and Arran region. In the month to November 1, there were 48 deaths from COVID-19 in this area. Between October 26 and November 1, 18 deaths certificates in the area mentioned COVID-19—the highest weekly number of fatalities since May.

Drivers working for First Bus in Glasgow have been instructed by the company to deactivate COVID-19 tracing Apps on their mobile phones while they are working, citing the “problem of false positives”. The policy enforced by First Bus and other transport companies is in line with the Scottish government's COVID-19 guidelines. A September 28 *Sun* article on the banning of the App cited an anonymous source saying the bus company should be, “doing more to protect their drivers.”

Evidence has emerged of Lothian Buses in the Edinburgh area failing to impose safe social distancing measures on its buses. An *edinburghlive* news piece published a photo of passengers packed on to a Lothian Bus, having to stand because all the seats were occupied. The same article described a woman having to push past people to exit the bus, with social distancing rendered a dead letter.

A Lothian bus driver told *edinburghlive*, “We are

actively encouraged by management to fill our buses to a standing capacity, that also includes the 100-seat three-axle buses. We are told to carry a full seated load of passengers. We are not choosing [to do] this.”

Bus drivers are among front line workers most likely to succumb and die from COVID-19, according to a report published this summer by University College London.

Between March and May this year, more than 30 bus workers in London lost their lives to COVID-19 after being told by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and Transport for London (TfL) that the virus was “low risk”. Bus drivers were denied basic PPE and other protections by TfL, the bus operators and Unite.

Such deadly conditions have been imposed on drivers with the blessing of the trade unions. Unite represents bus drivers at First Bus and Stagecoach, yet there is no reference to the deaths at Leeds or Kilmarnock on Unite's Facebook or Twitter accounts. This information is being concealed in order to block a united struggle by bus and other frontline workers against these dangerous conditions.

In September this year, the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee was launched to fight the spread of COVID-19. It was established with the support of the Socialist Equality Party and World Socialist Web Site in direct opposition to the pro-company trade unions that have worked with Transport for London and the Johnson government throughout the pandemic, sacrificing workers' lives to profit.

We urge bus workers to contact the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee and establish independent rank-and-file committees in your workplace. As the committee wrote in its founding statement: “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!”



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