

Open letter from London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee

Workers demand answers over COVID-19 infections at Cricklewood garage

Miles Driver

28 December 2020

The London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee has issued a letter to Unite Health and Safety representative Moawia El Bashir at Cricklewood garage. The committee's letter was drafted in response to yet another COVID-19 infection where 553 drivers and many more staff work.

The letter was sent to El Bashir on December 21, but the committee has received no reply to its urgent correspondence.

In May, long-time bus driver Ishrat Ali died from COVID-19, leaving behind a wife, four children and five grandchildren. At least two other drivers were admitted to intensive care units during the same period. Throughout February, March, and April, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan--who is chairman of Transport for London (TfL)--insisted that the risk of COVID-19 transmission on public transport was "low". In line with this deliberately misleading advice, no protection was provided to transport workers or the travelling public.

Ten months later, despite the preventable deaths of 35 London bus workers, a new wave of infections has struck, with information about garage outbreaks deliberately concealed in the interests of "operational efficiency", i.e., profits.

Responding to news of the latest infection, the committee's letter demands that Unite's full-time Health and Safety Representative immediately publishes the risk assessment Metroline claims to have conducted at the garage. The Committee has also demanded a list of all COVID-19 infections at Cricklewood. Without this information, it is impossible

to protect staff from workplace transmission of this highly contagious and deadly virus.

On Sunday, drivers learned that another driver from the garage had died, in this case from a heart attack. The driver, from the 189 route, worked on Christmas Eve and died on Boxing Day. It is not yet known whether the driver was tested for COVID-19. His son is reportedly being treated for COVID-19 in the intensive care unit at Northwick Park Hospital.

Throughout the pandemic, Unite the union has worked in partnership with TfL and the bus operators to enforce a hostile and unsafe work regime against drivers. It is urgent that bus workers take matters into their own hands by electing rank-and-file safety committees at all garages to introduce urgent measures to protect lives. This should include the demand for universal and regular testing for all drivers on demand, a guaranteed income for those who are self-isolating, and a reduction of the working day to 8-hours with no loss of pay.

Moawia El Bashir

Cricklewood Union Representative and Health and Safety Representative

Monday December 21, 2020

Dear Moawia,

I am contacting you on behalf of members of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee based at Cricklewood in relation to the latest COVID-19 infection of a worker at our garage.

The only notification of this latest infection has come via a letter from Metroline Human Resources, dated

Monday 14 December. This was posted on the noticeboard in the output area of the garage. This information has not been communicated via the company app or SMS which would have ensured all Metroline staff at Cricklewood were informed. It has been brought to our attention that some drivers are not aware of this latest infection among the staff.

Metroline's Head of HR, Darren Hill, writes that the company has instructed "a small number" of staff to self-isolate due to the risk of transmission through direct contact. No details are provided about how many staff have been affected. If it was a driver, what route number, shift times, dates and vehicles were involved? Or was the infected staff member an engineer, cleaner or administration worker? We have witnessed no evidence of any enhanced cleaning in the depot.

The correspondence from Hill claims a full risk assessment was conducted. But what areas of risk were assessed? Which aspects of the garage and vehicles did this cover? What criteria was used by Metroline to assess the risk to all garage staff?

As the Unite safety representative at Cricklewood you have a responsibility to make the risk assessment available immediately as it concerns the welfare and safety of all staff. In addition, there is the safety of the travelling public which Metroline has a legal responsibility to protect.

The threat posed by the resurgence of COVID-19 could not be more serious. We have obtained data through Freedom of Information showing the scale of the disaster across Transport for London. In October, there were 98 reported COVID-19 cases among London bus workers and 170 in November. On the London Underground there were 33 positive tests in September, 122 in October and 121 in November. How many cases of COVID-19 are there in December?

TfL data shows that transport workers in London are once more dying from COVID-19. Two employees on the London buses died in October and November, while another worker died on the London Underground. At Cricklewood, we are fully aware of where the increase in infections can lead, having lost our long-standing friend and colleague, Ishrat Ali. Two other drivers were hospitalised from Cricklewood during the first wave of the pandemic.

TfL has refused to provide a breakdown of garages, depots or stations where infections have occurred,

citing the financial cost of providing the information! This suppression of information means that transport workers cannot identify where they are at risk.

We demand that you inform all staff immediately about the number of infections of bus drivers and other workers at Cricklewood. How many staff have COVID-19 and how many are self-isolating with symptoms?

We trust that this request will be treated with the seriousness and urgency it merits.

Sincerely,

Miles Driver

London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee



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