

Freedom of Information request reveals surge of COVID-19 infections among London bus, rail and tube workers

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A video clip from the BBC documentary “Hospital” has been widely shared among bus drivers this past week. Filmed in October at London’s Barnet Hospital, it features doctors and nurses fighting to save the life of Mr Tang, a London bus driver with COVID-19.

A driver for 17 years, Mr Tang (his first name is not provided) explains that he became sick while working. He believes he may have caught the virus from passengers, telling the BBC’s interviewer that as many as 50 percent were not wearing face masks.

BBC interviewer: Were you not worried when the pandemic came? Did that not stop you from going to work?

Mr Tang: I’m serving London... Keep London moving.

BBC interviewer: How long have you been on this [hospital] unit?

Mr Tang: About four, five days.

BBC interviewer: And is your breathing getting better?

Mr Tang: Sometimes... Sometimes getting better. Sometimes getting worse.

Mr Tang’s health quickly deteriorated. He developed COVID pneumonia, was admitted to the intensive treatment unit (ITU) and placed on a ventilator. Doctors prescribed experimental drug therapies, including Remdesivir and Baricitinib, the latter targeting the body’s immune response to COVID-19. After two months under the care of dedicated nurses and doctors, the 72-year-old bus driver was discharged. A postscript explains that Mr Tang “is considering retiring”.

The BBC’s episode struck a chord among bus workers as a rare instance of the dangers they face being acknowledged. Despite the widely publicised deaths of London bus drivers in April and May of this year, the spread of coronavirus among the city’s bus, rail and tube workforce has been systematically concealed. Labour

Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and his deputy, Heidi Alexander—respectively chair and deputy chair of Transport for London (TfL)—have suppressed information about the COVID-19 threat across the capital’s transport network to “keep London moving”.

Khan and Alexander have worked with Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, enforcing its homicidal “herd immunity” strategy that prioritises the City of London (i.e., the stock exchange, banks and corporations) over the lives of the working class.

Throughout 2020, the Mayor’s office colluded with the major transport companies—Metrolink, Abellio, GoAhead, RATP Dev and Arriva—to block information about the location of COVID-19 infections among its 25,000-strong workforce. They were backed by Unite the union, which helped conceal workplace transmission of the virus as part of their tripartite agreement with TfL and the bus operators pledging “industrial harmony” and “operational efficiency”.

Faced with this political conspiracy, on November 18 the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request asking TfL to provide the number and location of COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths among London Underground, rail, bus and private taxi workers for September, October and November.

TfL’s FOI response, received on December 16, came with lengthy qualifications, including an admission that: “While some information in relation to your questions has been reported to us from private operators, it is not necessarily consistent nor provided to us in all cases.” In other words, the information was incomplete. TfL also refused to provide any information about COVID-19 infections among taxi drivers, who are known to suffer among the highest occupational mortality rate from

COVID-19.

Nonetheless, TfL's FOI response has revealed the extent of COVID-19 exposure across the capital's transport network.

According to TfL, Mr Tang was one of 98 London bus workers diagnosed with COVID-19 in October. By November, that number had nearly doubled, with 170 confirmed cases. No figures were available for December, but a further doubling would mean 340 bus workers are currently infected with COVID-19.

Across the London Underground, 33 Covid-positive tests were recorded in September, 122 in October and 121 in November, among frontline and office-based staff.

London's rail services also registered an increase in COVID-19 infections, indicated by the following breakdown:

Tragically, the FOI request revealed that two more transport workers died from COVID-19 in October—a London bus worker and a London Underground (LU) worker—taking the official death toll to 46.

Miles Driver, a founding member of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and a London bus driver for nearly 20 years, explained the background to the group's FOI request. "In April and May, we lost 30 drivers to Covid. Back then, we found out through word-of-mouth, or when notices were put up that such-and-such colleague has died. We were deliberately kept in the dark, a huge factor in allowing the virus to spread and claim so many lives.

"By mid-September we were hearing reports about new infections. The company issued contact tracing letters, but we were none the wiser about the number or location of new cases. Once again the information was being concealed."

In September, the newly formed rank-and-file committee issued an open letter to bus operator Metroline after a driver tested positive at Cricklewood garage. The committee demanded Metroline immediately inform workers about the number and location of COVID-19 infections and called for urgent safety measures, including mandatory onsite testing and full pay for bus workers needing to self-isolate.

Driver says Metroline made no formal reply to the committee's letter, but within days, company executives held secret tripartite talks with TfL, Khan and Unite the union. The committee's letter to Metroline went "viral" at the garages, says Driver, with Unite officials suddenly emailing their members, promising a "renewed safety

campaign" including a demand for "reporting of positive testing to Unite". Unite's safety campaign and its pledge that "we will keep you informed" have proved to be a dead letter.

While TfL has provided a partial tally of COVID-19 infections among bus, rail and tube workers, they have refused to provide a breakdown by garage or depot. The reason is not hard to fathom. Khan and the transport companies are determined to conceal infection clusters showing workplace transmission of COVID-19.

In refusing to provide information on the location of Covid infections, TfL cited Section 12 of the Freedom of Information Act: "TfL is not required to respond to a request if it would cost more than £450 to determine if that information is held, and to then locate, retrieve or extract that information from elsewhere (calculated at a rate of £25 per hour)."

TfL, Sadiq Khan, the Labour Party and Unite hold workers' lives in such low regard.

The exposure of COVID-19 illnesses and deaths by the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee proves that only independent action by the working class can protect the lives of drivers and passengers. The Socialist Equality Party urges all London bus workers to draw the necessary lessons, take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file committees at every garage. Drivers must reach out to transport workers across London, to organise a counter-offensive against TfL, Khan, and the Johnson government, including strike action to demand safe working conditions, including mandatory onsite testing for all workers, full income protection and a reduction in the working day to no more than eight hours with no loss of pay.

We urge bus and transport workers to contact the London Bus Drivers Rank and File Safety Committee for more information.



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