

Unite conceals ballot results for reinstatement of London bus driver Judith Katera

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The Unite union is doubling down on efforts to sabotage the defence of Judith Katera, a former health and safety rep at London's Battersea depot who was sacked after she exposed alleged corruption by a former Unite official.

Katera was dismissed by transport giant Abellio on December 4, based on allegations of racism toward another driver. The accusations against her were upheld despite what drivers say is clear evidence that she was set-up. A lifelong opponent of racism and discrimination, Katera is appealing her dismissal.

Abellio's victimisation of Katera in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked concern and anger among Battersea drivers. They are demanding to know why Unite has still not announced the outcome of its "consultative" ballot for Katera's reinstatement held on December 16-17.

More than six weeks later, the results, widely believed to have favoured Katera, are being concealed, with Unite demonstrating its contempt for democracy and its determination to prevent any action in Katera's defence.

A Battersea driver told WSWs, "We don't understand why we voted to reinstate Judith and the union doesn't tell us what happened. If this can happen to Judith—to the union health and safety officer—what is going to happen to us? Most of the drivers have come out of the union because they don't trust them. They just lie to us. We are paying money for nothing."

As the WSWs warned in December, Unite called the ballot solely to create the impression they were doing something for Katera and to prevent workers from taking independent action. On December 16, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee warned:

"The union is suppressing information about [Katera's] plight. They have issued no public statement and made no appeal for support from London's 25,000 bus drivers. This is doubtless because the issues surrounding her case raise uncomfortable questions about the role of Unite officials."

The phoney character of Unite's ballot was indicated by Unite official Guy Langston on December 14, when he wrote to drivers at Battersea, "This is a consultative ballot and not a call to take action". He emphasised the purpose of the ballot was to "send a strong message to Abellio".

The only "strong message" from Unite was that the company would have nothing to fear.

Despite Unite's transparent efforts at blocking action, "union activists" led by the Socialist Party's Moe Manir eagerly promoted the fiction that Unite was organising a "fight back" for Katera. Socialist Party members even campaigned for the ballot outside Battersea depot, wrapped in Unite flags. On December 16, the Socialist Party's newspaper praised Unite's consultative ballot stating, "We hope that such a vote will force management to reinstate Judith. But if they still refuse, the union would then be able to launch a full industrial action ballot."

Far from launching "a full industrial action ballot", Unite has refused to even report the outcome of the consultative vote! Since then, the SP has said nothing, demonstrating its political alliance with Unite against the working class. Manir and Unite official Joanne Harris censored a change.org petition launched by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee in Katera's defence, blocking drivers from posting the petition in the Bus Drivers in London Facebook group which they control and which has 4,500 members.

Katera's dismissal is part of a wave of victimisations against bus drivers during the pandemic. Backed by Unite, bus operators are targeting drivers who speak out, suspending them and forcing them to endure disciplinary proceedings whose methods resemble those of a Star Chamber. Such intimidation tactics, bringing the threat of dismissal and loss of income, are being used to enforce a hostile regime against drivers with endemic safety breaches including the absence of any effective track and trace system. As a result, more than 45 bus workers have lost their lives.

In the past seven days four more drivers have died from COVID-19: Dalubhai Patel and Chester Chiku from Edgware garage, Salahudin Ahmed from Willesden garage, and Ahmed Mustafa Mohammed from Perivale garage. According to reports on social media, bus workers, including drivers, controllers and managers, are being admitted to hospital with COVID-19.

According to a Battersea driver, "A lot of managers have gone sick with COVID-19 and a lot of drivers have tested positive. But the company doesn't bother to do follow-up. There is no track and trace. This has caused a lot of drivers to be fearful. Many are off sick. The company has tried to hire

agency drivers and they are now getting COVID too.

“The managers don’t care about the drivers. They were undermining drivers, not doing test and trace, because what are they looking at? Money. Now they are also realising that they can get COVID from the drivers—so now they are doing track and trace for the managers. A lot of the managers are not at the garages anymore.

“But when it comes to drivers, they don’t care. If a driver tests positive, they don’t look at who took over from that driver. That bus is supposed to come off the road. It’s supposed to be cleaned. That’s why you see at Battersea there’s a lot of people who have got infected. The virus is getting very bad.”

Throughout the pandemic, key workers have borne the brunt of the Johnson government’s homicidal “herd immunity” strategy. Since last March, 883 health and social care workers have died from COVID-19 in England and Wales alone, along with 570 education staff.

On Wednesday, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan told a Transport for London board meeting that a report on COVID-19 deaths among bus workers by University College London, “didn’t conclude that our transport workers were catching the virus while working”. This is a cover-up as UCL’s report made no independent examination of workplace transmission. That 70 Transport for London workers have died from COVID-19, 45 of them bus workers, is the outcome of deliberate neglect by the private transport operators, backed by Khan and Unite, sacrificing lives to defend the profits of the corporations and the super-rich.

On January 6, the London Bus Rank-and File Committee passed a resolution for the defence of Judith Katera (see below), calling on garages across London to organise similar resolutions. The committee urges bus and transport workers to establish rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-company trade unions to take forward the defence of the working class against the deadly pandemic.

Resolution in defence of Judith Katera

This meeting of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Committee demands the immediate reinstatement of sacked Battersea Health and Safety Rep Judith Katera.

Katera has been a London bus driver for 18 years and a rep at Battersea since 2017. She has fought to protect fellow-drivers during the pandemic, in the face of management indifference and Unite’s refusal to defend the safety and lives of bus drivers.

Katera was sacked based on frame-up allegations that she was racist toward another bus driver. The accusations against Katera, a lifelong opponent of racism and injustice, were manufactured by a former union convenor and two branch reps

after she found evidence of corruption by the convenor.

Bus company Abellio seized on the allegations to suspend Katera in July and sack her without warning less than three weeks before Christmas. Despite having been handed evidence of corruption, Abellio kept the ex-convenor and Unite branch reps on the payroll.

Unite is doing everything possible to bury any campaign in Katera’s defence. On December 16-17, a ballot for Katera was held at Battersea Depot, but Unite has not even told drivers the result. They are hoping Katera will give up, and that information about Unite’s close relationship with Abellio will be concealed from bus workers.

As a second deadly wave of COVID-19 claims the lives of bus workers, Katera and other drivers who stand up for safety are being targeted as a threat. The transport companies and Unite are working with Transport for London, Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan and the Johnson government to keep the service running no matter what the cost in human life. This must not be accepted!

The London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee calls on all bus workers to come to Katera’s defence. An injury to one is an injury to all! Emergency meetings should be convened at every garage—on Zoom or held outdoors and socially distanced—to pass resolutions for Katera’s unconditional reinstatement, with full compensation for loss of income.

As COVID-19 spreads, action must not be delayed. The fight to overturn Katera’s victimisation and sacking must be linked to urgent safety measures to protect lives. This includes mandatory onsite testing for all bus workers, the release of information about the number and location of infections at all garages, and full income protection for all those self-isolating. We urge London bus workers to join our committee and begin this fight today.

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