

Amid second wave of deaths: London bus drivers must form rank-and-file safety committees at all garages!

London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
23 February 2021

Fifty-nine London bus workers have died from COVID-19 in less than a year—17 since December alone—according to new figures released by Transport for London (TfL).

This catastrophic death toll, and the trauma and loss for loved ones left behind, is the outcome of corporate neglect and the ruthless “herd immunity” policy of Boris Johnson’s Conservative government that places profit before lives.

Amid a cover-up of garage infections, the suppression of any effective track-and-trace system, or priority access to vaccinations, bus workers are falling victim to a second wave of preventable illness and death. Fatalities in just 12 weeks include four bus workers in December, 10 in January and three so far in February, according to TfL. Reports from garages indicate the number of deaths this month could be far higher.

On average, more than one bus driver has died each week during the pandemic. Of the 59 bus workers who have died, 47 are bus drivers and 2 are Dial-a-Ride drivers.

Across London, 79 TfL workers have succumbed to COVID-19 since March 2020. This includes 14 tube and rail workers, two head office staff and four staff from “partner organisations”. On the London Underground, two deaths took place in December, four in January, and two in February. A rail worker (trams) has tragically died from the virus.

As far as the bus operators are concerned, our lives count for nothing. Our health and safety are being sacrificed to meet revenue targets and service levels decided in company boardrooms with Transport for London, Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and the Johnson government, and enforced by Unite the union.

Across the UK, at least 126,000 people have lost their

lives to COVID-19, almost 800,000 across Europe, 500,000 in the US, and 2.4 million worldwide. More than 20 million years of life have been lost, with victims dying 16 years earlier on average. This crisis is set to worsen. Johnson and his fellow criminals have announced a “road map” to lift national lockdown restrictions despite the prevalence of more contagious and deadly strains of the virus.

Driving a London bus is now one of the most dangerous occupations in Britain, with 135 deaths per 100,000, compared to 79.1 deaths per 100,000 for male nurses across England and Wales. Nationally, 83 bus and coach drivers have died since last February, a rate of 70.3 per 100,000. Like our brothers and sisters in the NHS, we are being denied PPE and other workplace protections.

Beyond London, drivers who have lost their lives to Covid in recent weeks include Christopher Turnham, 58, at Go Ahead’s Brighton and Hove Buses on January 20; Warren Pattinson and Adam Kaczkowski from Arriva Newcastle’s Jesmond depot who died mid-February; Thomas Rooney, 57, a First Bus driver from Scotland’s Larbert Depot on February 12, and a driver from Leeds First West Yorkshire who died February 17—the third among First West Yorkshire drivers in the city.

While the rich can shelter at home, the burden of the pandemic has fallen on the working class. A report leaked from the government’s Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) admitted that “deprivation, poor housing and work conditions, and delays in the test-and-trace system” had all contributed to high rates of COVID-19 and that “people in poorer areas were less likely to be able to self-isolate because they could not afford to lose income”. Drivers with Covid symptoms are being pressured to report for duties unless they have a positive test result. Many more are forced to work while ill because they are

denied adequate sick pay.

Workplace transmission is a major vector for the spread of the virus, but of 179,873 Covid-related cases handled by the Health and Safety Executive, not a single prohibition notice has been issued. This is the same HSE promoted by Unite and the Trades Union Congress that is effectively handing companies a license to kill.

Unite has worked with the Johnson government throughout the pandemic, backing Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer's support for the lifting of lockdown restrictions to "protect the economy" i.e., profits. After the first national lockdown, Unite supported the government's "transport plan" to resume normal timetable service across the capital, parroting TfL's lies that safety measures, including the "sealing" of cabin safety screens, "limits" on passenger numbers, and "mandatory" face-masks for passengers would protect lives. All serious efforts to suppress the virus were rejected.

The unions are an industrial police force against drivers. After an outbreak of Covid infections at Cricklewood bus garage, Unite opposed the call by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee for a walkout under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act, denouncing the proposed action as "unauthorised". Unite hasn't organised a single workplace action to protect our lives!

Anger at Unite's collusion and its refusal to defend drivers is at boiling point. This week's strike action at RATP Dev has won overwhelming support from drivers in the face of management intimidation, showing the potential for a unified offensive. But Unite has no intention of waging such a fight. At Metroline, where drivers repeatedly voted to strike against Remote Sign On, the union has blocked action. Not a single one of Unite's phoney ballots have demanded urgent safety measures to protect lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is the answer to this crisis? Some drivers have called for the sacking of Unite lead official for buses John Murphy, but Unite's role as a company union deeply enmeshed with the government and TfL cannot be reversed by removing a few officials at the top.

Other drivers are calling for mass resignations from Unite to join the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT), but this will resolve nothing either. While the RMT is promoted as a "militant" union, it has organised no industrial action during the pandemic, colluding with the Tory government via the Rail Industry Coronavirus Forum and agreed to join the Department for Transport's new Rail Industry Recovery Group whose

purpose is to slash operational costs. Over the past decade the RMT has helped oversee the closure of 265 ticket offices on the London Underground and more recently the backdoor introduction of forms of Driver Only Operation across the national rail network, downgrading the safety-critical role of conductors.

This month, the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) published an editorial accusing the world's governments of "social murder" in their collective response to the pandemic. The term social murder was first used by socialist leader Friedrich Engels, the lifelong collaborator of Karl Marx, to describe, "the political and social power held by the ruling elite over the working classes in 19th century England." More than a century and a half later, the subordination of every aspect of society's needs to the wealth of the capitalist oligarchy is confronting the working class in every country with a disaster.

Workers must reject with contempt all claims that there is "not enough money" to provide a safe workplace or adequate sick pay and health care. The wealth and resources must be made available by expropriating the major transport corporations and banks and placing them under public ownership. This means the fight for socialism.

In September, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee's founding statement made clear: "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!"

We call on our fellow bus workers to form rank-and-file safety committees at all garages independently of Unite and in unity with transport workers, teachers, NHS workers and with key workers across Europe and throughout the world. The pandemic is a global crisis and requires a global solution.



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