

Bus drivers at London's Cricklewood depot defend David O'Sullivan: "They want to make us into robotic slaves"

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has begun publishing interviews and messages in support of David O'Sullivan's reinstatement at Cricklewood bus garage in north west London.

O'Sullivan, 57, was sacked on February 3 after he sought to alert his colleagues to the spread of COVID-19 at the garage. He asserted his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act.

At least 60 bus workers in London have died from coronavirus since the start of the pandemic.

Today, we are running statements from bus drivers at Cricklewood garage who are members of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. Their names have been removed to protect against victimisation.

The first driver who spoke with WSWs described events in early January leading to O'Sullivan's dismissal: "It was a really bad situation, with infections spreading at the double. There were plenty of drivers going off sick and many were being pressured back to work. I personally know some of the drivers who were forced to go back.

"The managers didn't want to do anything, they even tried to hide the infections. Track-and-trace at the garage was and is non-existent.

"Managers wanted drivers who had Covid symptoms or were waiting for test results to go back to work. Drivers told managers it was unsafe, but they were ignored. Some drivers refused and said, 'No, I'm not coming back, it's completely unsafe.' But I know others came to work even though they had symptoms, especially new drivers, who didn't know they could refuse."

The committee member gave examples of other safety breaches by Metroline: "Social-distancing wasn't enforced. The stand-by drivers were kept in a very small room, all together, waiting for any duty to come in. There was no social-distancing between them. When these issues were raised with management, they said, 'It's your job, and if you're not happy you can resign.'

"Passenger limits were never enforced. Nobody cared about that at TfL [Transport for London]. When we as drivers tried to impose the limits, there were passenger complaints against us. Instead of following what TfL said—that we won't be punished for that—we've been punished. I know some of the drivers who were getting warning letters. So yeah, TfL and Metroline actually forced us to breach their passenger limits."

The WSWs asked about Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan's recent claim on LBC Radio that drivers' cabins were being cleaned between change-overs, "[Laughs] I can only say it's complete bullshit, honestly. They are not even properly cleaned when the buses go back to the garage. They are not even using disinfectants anymore. So that's complete BS."

Metroline was further failing to warn drivers when colleagues on their route caught Covid: "Our co-workers often weren't informed, especially when it was a spare driver who was sick. When drivers were informed, it was usually after two weeks, or even three weeks in one case, after the driver got a positive test. Track-and-trace at the garage was complete nonsense and it wasn't enforced at all."

Describing the background to the rank and file committee's call for a walkout to halt the spread of infections, the driver recalled, "In September we wrote to Metroline and we demanded to be protected from Covid, but the managers completely ignored us. And the union rep also completely ignored our problems and said everything that could be done had been done. So, the drivers made a statement because they wanted to be protected.

"The call for a walkout was to try and prevent infections from spreading."

Asked whether drivers had been fearful about the renewed spread of infections, in January, the committee member replied, "I would describe it more as anger. The drivers were angry that their voices were not being heard. Their concerns

were being ignored and they were being attacked by the company, the passengers and TfL.”

O’Sullivan’s sacking, he explained, was an attack on the rights of all bus workers: “David has been treated unfairly. The company is trying to push our legal rights out of bounds. They want to make us into robotic slaves, to just shut up and do our job and forget about our legal rights. Dave’s case is being used as a show of strength by the company.

“They are even spreading fake rumours about Dave’s case. They have been saying that Dave was giving out fake Unite flyers and was trying to pose as a union rep. This is ridiculous as the committee statement was actually condemning Unite’s inaction.

“Quite a lot of drivers are being intimidated by what the company is doing. Right now it’s fear, and anger of course at sacking Dave. Drivers are now getting warned or sent to ‘retraining’ for very minor things, minor scratches, minor damage that does not affect either the company, the bus, or mileage. We are driving everyday in busy streets and with plenty of traffic out there.

“Drivers are being suspended, victimised and warned over everything. Even small mistakes can go to a final written warning. There are at least two disciplinary hearings a day.

“It’s time to stand up. It’s time to show the company and the union that we have rights and a voice. The committee’s work is very important because the union is trying to cover-up everything. At the beginning of the pandemic they went along with TfL that there was nothing to worry about. The committee was telling the truth, that it’s a really dangerous virus to all of us, which the deaths of so many drivers has proven. Thanks to the committee, the drivers can actually know the truth, instead of TfL and union propaganda.

“Now, it’s the ruling class against the common people. It’s the rich people—and those in the middle class bought-off by the rich—against the common people who are fighting for their rights. The working class are facing more and more pressure, with our backs against the wall. We are just a revolution waiting to happen.”

Another driver from the rank-and-file committee explained, “I support the campaign to reinstate David O’Sullivan at Cricklewood. His unjust sacking shows the way all bus drivers were treated during the pandemic which was with complete indifference and contempt by the bus companies, particularly Metroline. All they are interested in is profit and nothing else.

“Dave was fighting for the defence of bus drivers’ lives. He risked his own job and stood up against the company, to do their job, which the union did not do.

“In the beginning of the pandemic Metroline refused bus drivers face masks on the grounds that it would frighten

passengers. Only later did they introduce the wearing of face masks for drivers entering the garage and output area where we sign on. Even basic PPE [personal protective equipment] was refused and when it became available it was a fight every day to request it.

“We as bus drivers worked throughout the pandemic. We had no lockdown, we worked on a Sunday rota which in many cases was longer hours but based on weekday pay rates, which meant a pay cut. Bus drivers who were furloughed lost pay because Metroline refused to top up the 80 percent paid by the government.

“The pandemic has been used to effectively tear up our contracts. I did not sign up to work for weekday rates on weekends. But as an individual if you refused to accept these conditions you would be fired. The union should not have accepted this. You are denied your rights. The pandemic has not been a loss for the big corporations such as Metroline—they have found a way to make more money at our expense. It has only been the working class which has suffered.

“Even before the pandemic struck, we were fighting against driver fatigue. This must have played a role in the terrible loss of life by London bus drivers due to the COVID-19 virus. The union has done nothing about these issues. David’s fight is our fight against these conditions. Why do we have to place our lives on the line just to go to work? Why, when someone raises basic health and safety issues, are they threatened with the loss of his livelihood?

“That is why I support the campaign for David’s reinstatement and to right this wrong that affects all drivers. It is our basic right to come to work in a safe environment. David’s defence must be seen to change this present situation.”

Visit here to find out more and join the campaign for David O’Sullivan’s reinstatement. You can donate to O’Sullivan’s legal defence here .



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