

Andy Niklaus, bus driver in Berlin, condemns dismissal of David O'Sullivan

Andy Niklaus**1 June 2021**

Bus driver David O'Sullivan, one of the founders of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, was sacked by his employer Metroline after warning his colleagues about the spread of coronavirus at the Cricklewood depot where he worked. Andy Niklaus, who wrote this statement in his support, is a bus driver in Berlin and a member of the Transport Workers Action Committee for Safe Workplaces. The action committee has previously adopted a solidarity statement opposing O'Sullivan's sacking and calling for his reinstatement with full compensation.

I strongly condemn the sacking of David O'Sullivan, who has attracted the opposition of Metroline management and the Unite union for openly campaigning for safe workplaces. As a member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee at the Cricklewood depot, he had asserted his right to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act in the face of the extreme risk of infection from coronavirus.

With his dismissal, Metroline is making an example in order to intimidate any critical voices against the lack of high-quality protection from the coronavirus in the workplace. The Unite union has actively supported management in this, proving once again that it does not hesitate to impose the profit interests of the company against the interests of the workers it claims to represent.

We in Germany watched in horror in March and April last year as Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Johnson in Britain campaigned to let the virus rip through society. They were encouraged in their actions by Sweden's government, made up of Social Democrats and Greens, and its advisor Anders Tegnell, who advocated allowing the virus to circulate in order to achieve herd immunity.

The Johnson government in Britain, supported by the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC), did not want to shut down workplaces so as not to jeopardise the flow of profits. The WHO's warnings that millions would contract the virus and hundreds of thousands would die was and is an acceptable price to them for maximising profits.

The beginning of the second wave and the emergence of the B.1.1.7 ("Kent") variant broke the camel's back. Not only did the 26,000 London bus drivers recognise the dangers they faced from management and government policies, but Johnson's policies had also driven the remnants of the National Health System (NHS) to the brink of collapse. The lockdowns implemented by Johnson's government came far too late, were too timid and were relaxed prematurely.

In Britain alone, the government, and with it the unions, have so far been responsible for the deaths of more than 150,000 people and almost five million infected with the virus. Their herd immunity policy makes them responsible for the emergence of the Kent variant, which is now circulating widely throughout the world. And there is no end in sight to the pandemic!

Dave O'Sullivan rightly warned his colleagues about the risk of infection on the buses. At its inception, the rank-and-file committee at Cricklewood depot clearly explained that only the independent intervention of bus drivers could win greater protection of health and life from COVID-19. The first wave of the pandemic revealed that the body responsible for urban transit in the capital, Transport for London, and the Unite union did nothing to provide full and high-quality protection for drivers. On the contrary! Together, they covered up the fact that the virus had spread disproportionately among drivers in relation to London's population.

The experiences of the workers in Britain and the bus

drivers in London are the same as workers worldwide, including we in Germany and Berlin.

It was only through a private message of condolence on Facebook and its publication in a Berlin daily newspaper that we even learned about a victim of the coronavirus among our colleagues. As a result of enquiries to the management of Berlin's urban transit company, the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG), by the local press and the *World Socialist Web Site*, we learned that 242 colleagues had been infected last year, and 220 so far this year. In addition, we have recently learned of the death of another colleague. However, the public service trade union Verdi, which is well informed about all coronavirus infections because of its seat on the BVG supervisory board, kept this information secret from the workforce.

Here in Berlin, as around the world, every infection is a result of the criminal "profits before lives" policy of those in power, including management and Verdi. The coronavirus measures came too late, were too soft and were relaxed too soon. For several months, we have been confronted with BVG management's demand to restore front boarding and ticket sales by bus drivers. Workers' protests have so far prevented this, but the struggle against the "return to normality" must enter a new phase.

What happened to David can happen at any time to any worker who stands up for safety! The unions invariably side with management, while their officials on the company boards and joint bodies pocket thousands a month for enforcing business interests against the workforce.

But every worker has the right to defend their health! That is why we need a united struggle in the rank-and-file committees and a political organisation that sets as its central task the abolition of the inhuman profit system.

As Leon Trotsky said, the working class will only remain a mass for exploitation by capital until it organises itself politically in a united way. The struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the Fourth International worldwide is inseparably connected to the struggle for your reinstatement!

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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