

Bus drivers in London, Leeds and Sheffield support campaign for David O’Sullivan’s reinstatement

Our reporters
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The campaign for the reinstatement of London bus driver David O’Sullivan has begun at garages in London and the North of England, winning strong support.

A transport worker for 30 years, O’Sullivan was sacked on February 3 after he sounded the alarm over the spread of COVID-19 infections at Cricklewood bus garage in north west London.

O’Sullivan is challenging his unfair dismissal by Metroline and a Crowd Justice appeal to raise an initial £10,000 by June 16 has nearly reached its target.

Leaflet distributions have taken place at interchanges in central London including at Euston, Hammersmith and Archway. Two hundred statements have gone into Metroline’s largest depot in Holloway North London where over 600 drivers are employed. Bunches of statements were taken by drivers and distributed in mess rooms.

At Holloway, a group of drivers who had recently left Unite took photographs of the statement to share on Facebook, whilst others said they had already read statements pinned on mess room noticeboards in defiance of the company and union.

Metroline drivers discussing O’Sullivan’s case with WSWs reporters described a disastrous situation in the depot created by Metroline’s corporatist alliance with Unite. Many described having had Covid and their brutal treatment by management. Drivers said they have been denied health and safety protections, been forced to supply their own cleaning products and faced the constant threat of being sacked.

Drivers at Holloway were not surprised by O’Sullivan’s sacking nor of the role played by the Unite union. Comments included, “They’ll sack you at a minute’s notice here, the union they don’t do nothing anyway—a waste of money.” Another driver said, “We don’t have a union to be honest.”

A senior driver said, “If you work 30 or 40 years here, they sack you just like that. Someday, it could be me or any of my colleagues.” Another experienced driver explained, “We have to watch our backs, management will find any excuse to get rid of us. They don’t like the fact that we are on the old contracts. I feel sorry for newer drivers, they have less benefits and you can blame the union for that.”

Drivers were keen to see a victory for O’Sullivan and wanted to discuss the programme of the London Bus Rank-and-File committee. A driver with more than 30 years’ experience explained, “Because of the crowd funding justice campaign, his case is becoming more known. More drivers are aware of what’s happened to Dave. At the tribunal, Dave will definitely win his case. But unfortunately, he will have a target on his back, and he will be discriminated against finding another job on the buses in London. One of my colleagues was fired after 31 years of service only to be reinstated later. Metroline don’t give a shit about us, we’re just a number.”

Another longstanding driver who took the statement said, “I agree with the campaign for reinstatement totally, absolutely. The situation with Covid was total chaos, just going through the motions. The management is absolutely hopeless. They just want to please TfL [Transport for London] and they don’t want to slow the cash coming in.

“Dave was hard hit and an innocent victim. If you complained about any cleaning or mechanics of the bus, they would just pass it on to the next driver. A lot of drivers bring their own cleaning materials with them like wipes and gloves and wipe down the steering wheel and driver’s seated area.”

John said, “Unite provided Metroline with the evidence against David, but did nothing to defend him. Dave was just standing up for his rights. His sacking was totally unjustified. This garage here is a joke, there is no health and safety protocol.”

Another driver who took the statement said the union was “useless. I feel uncomfortable that some of the union reps are his fellow drivers, as if they were checking up on me. I had Covid and I felt nervous about returning to work. The buses are not clean, they don’t give us any wipes. We’re not animals. I think David will win his case.”

Joseph was among the many drivers who took a statement, “I will definitely read this, I am not aware of this case. The union are a kind of police force they don’t do anything for you, they are more on the money side, not the workers. I didn’t join the union.”

Leaflet distribution has also begun in the North of England,

with Socialist Equality Party branches organising campaigns this past week at bus depots in Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Rotherham, Stockport and at Stagecoach and Go North West in Manchester.

Leeds

At First Bus in Leeds, drivers supporting O’Sullivan’s campaign had plenty to say about their own experiences during the pandemic.

Tom said, “It seems they fast-tracked him for sacking. The union is supposed to be there to support the workers instead of siding with the firm. It’s terrible but every driver’s job is unsafe now. There have been issues where the union should have called a strike, but they have just hushed it up.

“A lot of drivers are fearful of contracting the disease. Five drivers have died at the Hunslet office and in the Bramley office. They were various ages. I knew four of them. Drivers were shocked. I was close to one of them who died, his brother still works here.

“They [the government] have bailed out the banks, but they don’t bail out the working class. The big food retailers, Sainsbury’s, Morrison’s and Amazon have made millions throughout the pandemic—it should be given to their workers. Someone is taking advantage.”

Sally said, “David’s sacking is not right. He was speaking up for people. Rank-and-File Committees seems like a good idea. I will have a look at the leaflet on David’s case and think about making a contribution to his defence fund.

“In the first lockdown, a few of us had furlough, some of us didn’t. Those on furlough would do half the time on furlough and then half working. Three weeks on furlough and then three weeks working. For someone like me, who does a lot of overtime, I went from 50 hours a week to thirty-six and a half hours a week. Eighty percent [rate at which furloughed workers were paid] of thirty-six-and-a-half hours, meant I was only getting half of what I get paid normally. I am young and everything is expensive. I don’t get paid as much as some drivers because I am a new starter.

“This government only looks after the rich, those with a million or two, they don’t look after ordinary workers. There were things that should have been brought in sooner when the pandemic spread. Everything was late after other countries had already brought them in.”

Joe, a young bus driver for First Bus Leeds said, “There are a lot of issues about Covid that ought to be raised. All the political parties are similar really—they are good at PR but don’t do anything to benefit ordinary people. The unions are similar as well, they are not really there for us.

“There are definitely problems with Covid in our area as

there are in London, but I wouldn’t say they are solely the result of management’s failures. There are a lot of factors involved. It is clear from the figures around the world that it was possible to stop the spread of the virus, so the fact that so little was done here needs to be looked at.

“They were more concerned about making money than they were about stopping the virus from spreading. There are people who made a lot of money during the lockdown. The rich keep on getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer. Bus drivers had to keep working in spite of the global pandemic, but we didn’t get much recognition for what we did.”

Sheffield

In Sheffield, a team campaigned outside Ecclesfield Stagecoach bus garage during lunch hour yesterday. Some 20 drivers, the vast majority who walked past, took leaflets about O’Sullivan’s campaign. Many indicated they were not surprised by the actions of the company or the union as they felt that efforts to oppose unsafe conditions were dealt with by victimisation and harassment.

Sam, a driver for Stagecoach, agreed that bus workers were at risk throughout the pandemic, “We have screens, but the issue is cash. Since the start of the pandemic, we have repeatedly asked not to use cash for fares. Giving change means you have physical contact. There is contactless on all our buses, but they should have a system like the Oyster card in London. They are putting bus drivers at risk. I think all frontline workers should have had priority for the vaccine.”

Gary said, “It’s a case of the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. I’ve heard that other bus companies are trying to fire and rehire. It’s wrong what happened to David. I will have a good read of what you are saying.”

Another driver explained there was little protection for drivers during the pandemic—he had caught Covid in early January and was seriously ill for several weeks. He contradicted company claims that the garage was safe, “the garage was rife with Covid and people were dropping off like flies.” He agreed to read the statement and circulate it to other drivers saying that O’Sullivan should be supported by bus drivers everywhere.

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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