

UK: Johnson government's ending mandatory face masks on public transport faces major opposition

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London Mayor Sadiq Khan has announced that face coverings must be worn on London's transport network after the ending of restrictions on July 19 by the Conservative government.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps had both stressed that government guidance was for passengers to only to wear masks voluntarily on busy services. Khan's announcement that Transport for London (TfL) would insist that mask-wearing continues on the London Underground, bus, tram, DLR, Overground and TfL Rail network, and in taxis and private hire vehicles, prompted Shapps to claim that he had always "expected, and indeed, wanted" some train, bus and rail companies to insist on mask-wearing on their services.

In reality the hands of both have been forced, not only by massive public opposition, with a YouGov poll showing that seven in 10 people favoured maintaining face coverings on public transport, but above all the threat of industrial action by transport workers.

An indication of the breadth of opposition is provided by an online petition opposing ending the mandatory wearing of face coverings on public transport, which gathered over 120,000 signatures. The petition is on the Organise platform, which allows workers to create petitions anonymously over workplace concerns. It is linked to a letter addressed to Health Secretary Sajid Javid and transport providers, highlighting concerns over the transmission of the virus in enclosed spaces with inadequate ventilation on buses, trains and taxis. It states, "Workers have no choice than to be close to strangers on public transport, and it's especially worrying for workers who are clinically vulnerable, or live with people who are. The staff working in the

transport industry need protecting, as do older and more vulnerable people who rely on public transport to get around."

Comments on the petition page include one that reads simply "Humanity", while others state, "Essential to protect workers and the public", "I want to be protected, also we are in such close proximity on tubes and trains, it makes sense to protect each other. Covid has not gone away."

Such popular sentiment in the working class finds no organised expression. The main transport train unions, Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) workers union, have responded to the Johnson government's murderous agenda with a perfunctory call for the mandatory wearing of face masks. They are obliged to acknowledge the huge dangers posed by the government's actions, but this is not accompanied by any call for a response from the working class. Both unions point to the established agreements with the corporations and government agencies formed from the start of the pandemic and which they claim have ensured their members' safety. This is under conditions where rail and bus workers have suffering among the highest death tolls of any occupation, with fatalities among London bus drivers three times the national average.

Mick Lynch, general secretary of the RMT, in a July 12 letter to the governments of England, Wales and Scotland, describing the removal of mandatory face masks as "fatal folly" and asked for "reassurances" that other mitigation measures would be maintained.

Unite national officer for transport Bobby Morton described Johnson's confirmation on July 12 of the scrapping of face coverings as "pigheaded" and "ill-

conceived.”

Unite stated that it had briefed its members on their right to invoke Section 44 and 100 of the Employment Right Act, reminding them that they can remove themselves from the workplace if they believe their health is being placed in serious and imminent danger.

This is a fraud. In January, amid a covid outbreak at his garage at Cricklewood, London bus driver David O’Sullivan circulated a leaflet published by the London Bus Rank and File Committee informing bus drivers of their rights under Section 44. Unite denounced this as “unauthorised action” and sided with management during a disciplinary hearing that led to his dismissal.

Khan’s claim that his volte face is based on health considerations and the guidance of the World Health Organisation (WHO) is belied by his actions in promoting the wider abandonment of containment measures in collaboration with the government. Over the last few weeks, he has been at the forefront of promoting mass gatherings around the Euro football tournament, which the WHO has identified as “super spreader” events. He was photographed at Wembley Stadium before the semi-final between England and Denmark alongside the Health Secretary Javid, performing the elbow bump with the accompanying slogan on Javid’s Twitter account declaring: “It’s coming home.” The euphoria around the progress of the England side to the final was cynically exploited by the Tories and Labour to generate a false sense of national unity and to stampede public opinion into accepting the lifting of covid restrictions.

The maintenance of the face coverings mandate is dictated by the need to preserve the corporatist relations cultivated through the Tripartite Agreement between the unions, TfL, and the private operators from the start of the pandemic against the threat from below.

Far from the “honourable role” Unite now claims the Labour Mayor has played in protecting the lives of bus workers, on April 9, 2020, Unite, TfL and the private operators signed a letter of agreement denying drivers the right to wear face masks, contributing to the 30 deaths in the first wave of the pandemic. The rise in death toll to at least 60 London bus workers has been guaranteed through this ongoing corporate partnership.

On May 17, passenger numbers allowed on board London buses were doubled. Bus drivers have reported the loading signs displaying maximum capacity have

been removed. There is widespread anger over the inadequate ventilation in drivers’ cabs and disputes over the claim that they have been properly sealed against exposure.

The extension of face coverings on London public transport is a partial victory which has been enforced under the threat of an emerging opposition, not just on the buses but across all sections of workers. This threat must now be made into a reality.

Every section of the working class is at risk from the “bonfire of the regulations” meant to combat Covid-19. They cannot allow even a nationwide retreat over the scrapping of face coverings to be used to salvage the Tories broader agenda of sacrificing workers health and lives in a new wave of the pandemic to ensure the profits of the corporate oligarchy.

The Labour Party and trade unions are in alliance with the government and its naked policy of herd immunity. Former Labour Health Secretary Ben Bradshaw, interviewed on BBC’s *Newsnight* July 5, echoed the words of Johnson stating that there will inevitably be more hospitalisations and deaths. The prominent Blairite declared that the problem was the government had not prepared the country for this. The ditching of face coverings on public transport was undermining public confidence, risking the return to work and reopening of the economy being stalled.

The working class must intervene in this crisis in defence of its independent interests—prioritising public health and jobs, wages and safe working conditions over corporate profit. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent from the trade unions, to mobilise a unified struggle against big business, the Tory government and its Labour accomplices. The fight against the pandemic and its economic and social fallout demands that the full cost of emergency health measures and social mobilisation of the working class relief is paid by the giant corporations and banks through a determined struggle for socialism.



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