

UK: Sheffield bus drivers support campaign against victimisation of David O'Sullivan

Our correspondent
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Bus drivers in Sheffield, South Yorkshire gave their support to the campaign against the victimisation of London bus driver David O'Sullivan. They spoke of the importance of the stand he took to defend drivers against the spread of Covid-19 and to demand safety measures to protect lives.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign teams have been distributing the leaflet "Reinstate London bus driver David O'Sullivan: For a safe workplace against Covid-19! No to victimisations!" among drivers at First South Yorkshire (FSY), at its Olive Grove depot and Pond Street bus station in the city centre. FSY is a subsidiary of First Group, a major UK-owned bus and rail transnational. It employs 200,000 workers globally, with revenues last year of £7.8 billion. It operates 20 percent of all UK bus routes.

The leaflet has prompted a wide-ranging debate over the dangers drivers have been exposed to with the pandemic and the restructuring now demanded by the private operator.

Drivers were disgusted at the mistreatment O'Sullivan at the hands of Metroline for his principled stand on safety, agreeing that this was a test case for worker's rights in the pandemic.

A particular talking point has been the role of Unite the union. Initial shock that Unite sided with Metroline against O'Sullivan has given way to anger based on their own experience with the growing collusion between First Group and Unite. The union agreed to the suspension of terms and conditions during the pandemic, which the company is now seeking to make permanent in a new contract.

Drivers reported that this includes the extension of the maximum of five and a half hours behind the wheel, as opposed to the normal four and a half, and late notice of rotas to make scheduling easier for management.

Across First Group Unite is pleading poverty on behalf of the company while offering up workers for greater exploitation and flexibility similar to the gig economy.

On Thursday drivers in Sheffield voted down the new contract, which was backed by Unite. The results have yet to be published and Unite has not reported the issue of the new terms or ballot on its official website. The contract included the increase in maximum time without a break, reducing payments for any time at work not spent behind the wheel, including transition time signing on and off the bus, and an extension of unpaid meal breaks to 70 minutes, with basic training to be completed unpaid on days off. Drivers pay would not be uplifted except for weekend hourly rates of 60 pence an hour.

Drivers spoke of Unite being squarely on the side of the company, describing the union as "in bed" and "in the pockets" of management.

For the protection of drivers, the following comments appear without their names.

A driver of many years stated, "I've read your leaflet. Reading between the lines it looks like Unite is working with the company to victimise him [O'Sullivan]. That is a disgrace."

"We are looking at worse terms and conditions here and the union has told us not to take strike action as it will be long and drawn out and will not achieve anything. My answer to that is we should hit them harder and go all out."

"The union denies that they are siding with management. However, on everything the company demands the union rolls over and the company gets what they want."

Another driver said of O'Sullivan, "He is a hero, but today heroes are turned into zeroes when you stick your

neck out. The country is run like a corporation. Money is put before lives. There has never been any real enforcement of mask wearing and we have been expected to handle cash to take fares.

“The unions don’t work for the people. They work for the corporations. With the strike at Go North West [in Manchester, against fire and rehire] I don’t think they wanted it to spread.”

A young driver explained his anger over the victimization and how he was having to consider political issues for the first time.

“It is sickening to hear [O’Sullivan] has been given the sack. He has worked hard and is obviously very dedicated, but for them you are just a number. He was standing up for his rights and everyone else’s.

“It’s all about greed and money. I don’t make a habit of following politics, but this government is against the working class. We need to stand together across the country and yes across the world.”

Many drivers were aware of the death toll from Covid among their colleagues in London. They explained that drivers in Sheffield were forced to take independent action against the company and the union, similar to what occurred at depots across the capital. Nationally there have been 14 recorded deaths of First employees, with clusters of infections and deaths at Leeds and in Scotland.

“He was right to stand up for safety. Workers need to take action to defend their legal rights because nobody else will, including Unite. At the start of the pandemic we had nothing from the company to protect us and the union did nothing. We had to bring in cling film to cover the holes in the driver’s screen and bring in our own hand gel. All they gave us later were gloves.

“The union are in bed with the company. They do not fight our corner.”

Opposition to the new terms and conditions has been fuelled by a recognition that First Group has remained profitable throughout the pandemic, off the backs of drivers who have worked under the most dangerous conditions, and via government subsidies.

Another long serving driver stated, “There are lining their own pockets and not giving any benefits to drivers whatsoever. It’s just take, take, take.

“I’ve worked through this pandemic for nearly 18 months now and I’ve not had a thank you or a penny. And now they’ve come back with this to take our terms

and conditions. It’s disgusting.”

“They say they’re losing £2.6 million. I think they’re not losing anything through this pandemic because of the government bailout.”

“If the deal we are voting on doesn’t go through I’m presuming they will go to Plan B—90 days’ notice. In other words they will take our contract off us and give us the terms and conditions they want.”

“I’ve seen your leaflet. It is good what you guys are doing for drivers. He [O’Sullivan] has a good comment about it. All the best to him.”

“All the drivers ought to get together and say ‘Right! We’ll fight them all the way’. Never mind the union because they aren’t what they ought to be. Twenty-five years ago, they might have had a cat in hell’s chance. But not these days. It’s [the union] in the company’s back pockets now.”

The key issue facing drivers is breaking the stranglehold of Unite, which functions as a company stooge protecting the profits of the private operators and as an industrial policeman. The abandonment of all mitigation measures combating the pandemic by the Johnson government in the last week and the renewed offensive against terms and conditions is driving workers into critical struggles, which can only be taken forward through the development of rank- and-file committees to unify the working class in a broader political fight against capitalism.



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