

London bus workers demand reinstatement of David O'Sullivan, sacked over COVID-19 safety

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Bus drivers at northwest London's Brent Cross interchange gave their support to sacked bus driver David O'Sullivan when he visited Saturday. O'Sullivan was dismissed by Metroline bus company in February after he cited his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act.

O'Sullivan was targeted for warning his colleagues about the spread of COVID-19 at the garage and for demanding urgent safety measures to protect lives.

Under Section 44, employees have the right to remove themselves from a workplace that poses an imminent risk to health and safety. Metroline refused to address O'Sullivan's safety concerns. Instead, they held an internal disciplinary hearing, held largely in O'Sullivan's absence, finding him guilty of "disseminating false and damaging information" and "inciting unlawful industrial action". He was sacked for gross misconduct.

O'Sullivan is challenging his unfair dismissal and has launched a crowdfunding to finance his legal case. The 58-year-old father of four has been a London transport worker for nearly three decades and has a spotless employment record. A preliminary hearing at the Employment Tribunal is scheduled for November 24 with a full hearing due next year.

On January 7, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, of which O'Sullivan is a member, had warned there were up to 12 infections at Cricklewood garage. Its statement called for immediate steps to suppress workplace transmission of the virus. Months earlier, in September 2020, the committee had issued an open letter to Metroline Managing Director Stephen Harris, CC'd to Transport for London (TfL) and Unite the union officials John Murphy and Peter Kavanagh, calling for action on safety. Its appeals went unanswered.

The Committee's warnings about the risks at Cricklewood have since been confirmed.

In May, the office of London Mayor Sadiq Khan revealed there were 46 cases of COVID-19 at the garage between October 2020 and the beginning of January. Updated figures released by Khan's office last month shows there were 56 infections at Cricklewood between October 2, 2020 and August 2, 2021.

But the situation at Cricklewood was only the tip of the iceberg. The following list shows COVID-19 infections were rampant across nearly all London bus garages, with a staggering 2,665 drivers testing positive between October 5, 2020 and August 3 this year:

- Abellio London, Battersea - 92
- Abellio London, Beddington - 33
- Abellio London, Walworth - 43
- Abellio London (West), Hayes - 6
- Abellio London (West), Southall - 31
- Abellio London (West), Twickenham - 35
- Arriva London North, Ash Grove - 16

- Arriva London North, Barking - 13
- Arriva London North, Clapton - 41
- Arriva London North, Dartford - 54
- Arriva London North, Edmonton - 11
- Arriva London North, Enfield - 44
- Arriva London North, Grays - 14
- Arriva London North, Palmers Green - 33
- Arriva London North, Stamford Hill - 4
- Arriva London North, Tottenham - 36
- Arriva London North, Wood Green - 34
- Arriva London South, Brixton - 29
- Arriva London South, Croydon - 21
- Arriva London South, Norwood - 15
- Arriva London South, Thornton Heath - 27
- Arriva London North, Finsbury Park - 1
- Arriva London North, Watsons Road - 0
- Blue Triangle, River Road - 115
- Docklands Buses, Henley Road - 0
- Docklands Buses, Silvertown - 27
- London Central, Bexleyheath - 49
- London Central, Camberwell - 55
- London Central, Morden Wharf Road - 33
- London Central, New Cross - 80
- London Central, Peckham - 27
- London General, Merton - 72
- London General, Northumberland Park - 82
- London General, Putney - 14
- London General, Stockwell - 52
- London General, Sutton - 22
- London General, Waterloo - 4
- London General, Waterside Way - 10
- Metrobus, Croydon - 44
- Metrobus, Orpington - 67
- H C T Group, Hackney Ash Grove - 41
- H C T Group, Walthamstow Avenue - 19
- Metroline, Brentford - 20
- Metroline, Cricklewood - 56
- Metroline, Edgware - 22
- Metroline, Harrow Weald - 26
- Metroline, Holloway - 52
- Metroline, King's Cross - 7
- Metroline, Lampton - 5
- Metroline, Perivale - 12
- Metroline, Potters Bar - 51
- Metroline, West Perivale - 29

- Metroline, Willesden - 32
- Metroline West, Alperton - 3
- Metroline West, Greenford - 6
- Metroline West, Uxbridge - 33
- Metroline West, Willesden Junction - 33
- London Sovereign, Edgware - 31
- London Sovereign, Harrow - 15
- London United, Atlas Road - 36
- London United, Fulwell - 36
- London United, Hounslow - 36
- London United, Hounslow Heath - 8
- London United, Shepherds Bush - 22
- London United, Stamford Brook - 22
- London United, Tolworth - 15
- London United, Wandsworth - 0
- Quality Line, Epsom - 17
- East London, Barking - 39
- East London, Bow - 80
- East London, Leyton - 38
- East London, Rainham - 59
- East London, Romford - 46
- East London, West Ham - 57
- Selkent, Bromley - 15
- Selkent, Catford - 50
- Selkent, Kangley Bridge Road - 13
- Selkent, Plumstead - 47
- Sullivan Buses, South Mimms - 9
- Tower Transit, Lea Interchange - 68
- Tower Transit, Westbourne Park - 58
- Uno Buses, Hatfield - 15

Total: 2,665 positive tests for COVID-19 [Source: <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2021/1968#a-197210>]

The extent of infections prior to October is unknown. TfL did not bother to gather information about COVID cases from bus operators for more than eight months. Even as the death toll among drivers mounted, infections were systematically concealed, a practice that has continued throughout the pandemic. During the first wave of infections, between March and May 2020, 27 bus drivers died. That number has since climbed to 54, with a total of 69 London bus workers dead from COVID-19. Across TfL bus, rail and underground services, 95 workers are dead from coronavirus.

Such carnage is the outcome of policies put in place by the transport companies, TfL, the Johnson government, and Labour Mayor of London Khan, aided by the transport unions, prioritising profit over lives. No-one has been held accountable for these deaths, while workers who speak up and fight for safety have been victimised and sacked.

“I hope you win this,” a Cricklewood driver told O’Sullivan on Saturday. “This is what Metroline is, and the union work with them. They come down heavy when it suits them as they have a free hand to do so.”

He said the company had sought to intimidate drivers from raising concerns and many had been disciplined or sacked for minor issues, “Because they are so short of drivers, they are not doing this at present. But we still do not have a voice at all.

“We have no masks—the company mask, with the company logo, was given to us a long time ago. We wash them and they wear out, but we are not given new ones. We still have to fight for hand sanitiser as well.

“You can see that the government are now vaccinating children, all to keep the schools open to send us to work. We can die and they just get someone else to take our place.”

Another driver from Cricklewood greeted O’Sullivan, explaining he was one of those diagnosed with COVID-19 in January. He explained, “I was so, so upset with the company. In January this year I had COVID-19,

in the New Year. I had a fever and took the COVID test—I was positive so I could not come in. I was off work for 10 days and then returned to work.

“A few weeks later I had a holiday, in February, but when I got my holiday pay it was the bare minimum. Because I had COVID, they deducted my holiday supplement, about £25 per day. What they want me to do is to come to work with COVID. The rules are wrong. I had the virus and they said you only get the minimum. I have paid for having the virus!

“This is the policy, and this is what the union is worth—it was they who agreed to this. We need someone like you, a flag bearer, you are very brave, very brave. I really want to support you for what you do, you fight for us all.

“I hope you win. If they lose, they will look very bad and that’s why they have this QC [Queen’s Counsel]. You need to be on the media more. Please let me know what is happening with the case. I will definitely go to the crowdfund and support it.”

Members of the Socialist Equality Party also campaigned at Golders Green, with around a dozen drivers signing up for regular updates about O’Sullivan’s campaign and for more information from the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

A Cricklewood driver later told O’Sullivan he was shocked to learn of the extent of deaths, “That is a lot of people—95 TfL staff—it’s criminal, it really is, and that 54 of these are [bus] drivers. All the bus companies are concerned about is the mileage, it’s drastic that this is happening.

“I am the only breadwinner in the family. I have little ones to protect, so I am always using my mask even when it’s uncomfortable. I do not want to take the virus home. We are around a lot of people all the time, every day and we have to be safe. The company do give us PPE but not enough. The union does nothing about this, they do not stand for drivers.”

In April 2020, Unite the union insisted in joint letters with the companies that face masks were not necessary and have not organised a single strike or other form of industrial action to protect workers’ lives.

The driver concluded, “If all drivers unite, we are strong, and that is what you are trying to do. Your case is strong because you told the truth and you were right and a lot of drivers support you and want you to win, and if you win it’s going to look bad for them and drivers will rejoice. I support you and want you to win.”

We urge workers to get involved in supporting O’Sullivan’s fight. His campaign is a test case for the rights of key workers during the pandemic and must become the spearhead of a fight to end the herd immunity agenda being enforced by the ruling class and the pro-company trade unions and Labour Party. Please donate to O’Sullivan’s crowdfund appeal and visit the WSWs campaign page for more information. A statement launching the second stage of the crowdfund appeal will be published next week.



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