

Join the fight for London bus driver David O’Sullivan’s reinstatement! Defend the rights of key workers during the COVID-19 pandemic!

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party and the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee
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The Socialist Equality Party and the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee urge workers everywhere to support the growing campaign for the reinstatement of London bus driver David O’Sullivan, sacked for defending his colleagues’ essential right to a safe workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A preliminary hearing over O’Sullivan’s unfair dismissal claim will be held at the Employment Tribunal on November 24, with a full hearing expected next year. O’Sullivan will expose systematic breaches of workplace health and safety by his employer Metroline, Transport for London (TfL), Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, Unite the union and the Conservative government.

O’Sullivan’s fight is a test case for the rights of key workers.

He was targeted for warning his colleagues about the spread of COVID-19 and for demanding urgent safety measures to protect lives. He was dismissed on February 3, after citing his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act and for informing his co-workers of their rights under the Act.

Just months earlier, the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, of which O’Sullivan is a member, sent an open letter to Metroline flagging serious breaches of health and safety and calling for remedial measures to suppress the virus. The committee’s letter was sent to Metroline Managing Director Stephen Harris, ComfortDelGro Group CEO Yang Ban Seng, London’s Deputy Mayor for Transport and former Labour MP, Heidi Alexander, and Unite the union officials John Murphy and Peter Kavanagh. The letter was ignored.

For millions of essential workers this will come as no surprise. Despite being hailed as “frontline heroes”, the lives of key workers in transport and logistics, food and drinks manufacturing, online retail, the National Health Service and

social care, have been treated as expendable. The government’s herd immunity experiment allowed the virus to run rampant, with workers’ lives and those of the elderly and disabled regarded as collateral damage. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s outburst last November, “No more fucking lockdowns, let the bodies pile high” gave voice to a financial oligarchy determined to protect its own obscene wealth and keep the economy open over a mountain of corpses, with over 160,000 dead and 4.7 million globally.

At least 95 TfL workers have died from COVID-19, according to figures released on September 15—69 were bus workers and 54 of these were drivers. This equates to four bus workers dying every month since March 2020. They are not just numbers! They are the parents, siblings, husbands and wives of shattered family members left behind. Yet no-one has been held accountable for this crime.

Instead, drivers are being treated like criminals, victimised, intimidated, dragged through disciplinary proceedings and stripped of their livelihoods. O’Sullivan, 58, has been a London transport worker for three decades but his spotless employment record and years of service counted for nothing.

At O’Sullivan’s disciplinary hearing, a kangaroo court held largely in his absence, Metroline accused him of spreading “false and damaging information” and of “inciting unlawful industrial action”. In fact, O’Sullivan’s warnings about the spread of COVID at Cricklewood garage have been confirmed. Information released under the Freedom of Information Act proves that between December 2020 and January 2, 46 employees at Cricklewood garage tested positive for the virus.

The situation at Cricklewood was only the tip of the iceberg. New figures released by TfL show there were 2,665 positive COVID-19 tests recorded at London bus garages between October 2020 and August 2 this year. The numbers are staggering. 115 infections were recorded at Go-Ahead’s

River Road depot, 92 infections at Abellio's Battersea depot, 82 at Northumberland Park, 80 at New Cross, 80 at Bow. Such clusters are overwhelming proof of workplace transmission of COVID-19 which the bus companies and TfL have repeatedly denied and failed to investigate. Mayor Khan declared that TfL did not conduct safety inspections at London bus garages during the pandemic because it was not safe to do so!

The coronavirus pandemic is not over. Despite 66.6 percent of the population being fully vaccinated, COVID-19 cases are higher now than they were last summer. There were 140 deaths per day in the UK over the past week and 7,629 deaths since July 1. The reopening of schools in England and Wales is creating a surge of infections and hospitalisations among young people, just as it has already in Scotland and Northern Ireland, followed by the infection of older age groups.

As far as the Johnson government, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party and the trade unions are concerned, workers must "learn to live with the virus". Social distancing, safe passenger limits, mask wearing, ventilation and other safety measures are being lifted or exist in name only. The same ruthless and socially callous policy is being implemented by the capitalist class in every country led by the United States whose death toll from COVID-19 has now officially surpassed 700,000.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee is affiliated to the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The IWA-RFC supports the call by leading scientific and medical experts for a policy of COVID eradication. A programme to stop the pandemic poses the need to harness scientific knowledge and technology to further the interests of society in opposition to its plundering by big business and the super-rich. It must be implemented by workers themselves, organised internationally and using every action and resource at their disposal.

In the UK, Europe, the Americas and Asia, there are mounting signs of working-class opposition to the herd immunity agenda of the ruling class and its subordination of every aspect of social life to profits. In recent weeks the following struggles have erupted among bus and transport workers:

- In Sydney, Australia, 180 bus workers walked off the job earlier this month in protest over COVID-19 safety and the end of regular testing. The snap strike took place after workers learned that a driver at Smithfield depot had tested positive for COVID-19. The virus in Australia is currently growing exponentially after having been eliminated through lockdown restrictions that are now being lifted.

- On September 3, 54 school bus drivers in the US state of

Georgia began a rolling sickout and protest over pay and lack of adequate protections from COVID-19.

- Around 1,500 workers at Dublin Bus in Ireland have voted down a union-backed proposal by the company to worsen the working conditions of drivers. The plan would force drivers to work multiple routes, with increased Sunday working and reduced summer breaks.

- Strikes by bus, coach and tram workers have erupted this past fortnight in France in the cities of Lyon, Paris, Le Havre, Dijon and Reims over working conditions and safety.

- German rail workers struck throughout August-September against a planned pay freeze and attacks on pensions by Deutsche Bahn. Despite rising militancy, the strikes were called off by the rail unions on the basis of a sell-out contract that resolves none of the problems facing drivers, conductors and other rail employees.

Just as the virus knows no national boundaries, neither does the global assault on the social rights and conditions of the working class. On every continent, workers confront governments, employers and trade unions intent on making the working class pay for the trillions in bailout funds paid to the corporations and financial markets during the pandemic.

We appeal to workers all over the world to support the fight for O'Sullivan's reinstatement. His campaign must spearhead the struggle for a policy of COVID eradication and to push back against the intensified attacks on the conditions, pay and basic rights of the working class all over the world being demanded by the ruling class and pro-company unions.

O'Sullivan's campaign has already won the support of hundreds of London bus workers. It has received messages of solidarity and donations from workers across the UK, Germany, France, Norway, Turkey, the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil, India and Sri Lanka. This campaign must now be intensified through the organisation of workplace meetings, resolutions, and the completion of O'Sullivan's £20,000 legal crowdfund appeal. Join the fight today!



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