

# BBC Radio 4 investigates the London bus drivers who died from COVID: “I won’t stop until I get answers”

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On Tuesday night, BBC Radio 4 aired the results of its months-long investigation into the deaths of 54 London bus drivers. It was hard-hitting journalism, offering a rare platform on the mainstream media for the voices, views and insights of bus workers and their families.

“Occupational Hazard: The bus drivers who died from Covid”, was produced by Annabel Deas with BAFTA-winning journalist Paul Kenyon for BBC 4’s current affairs programme, *File On 4*. The episode starts with a little-known fact: that London’s bus drivers have died during the pandemic at a rate similar to frontline nurses.

“Did the companies do all they could to protect their drivers once they knew the danger?”, Kenyon asks as the programme begins. What follows offers an unmistakable answer, presenting what amounts to an indictment of the bus companies, Transport for London (TfL), the office of Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, Unite the union and Public Health England.

The BBC’s investigative team shows how the pandemic was experienced by London’s bus drivers and their families. They also interview the scientists and whistleblowers whose warnings were ignored.

At the heart of the story are the preventable deaths of 69 London bus workers, 54 of whom were drivers. Their plight is told by Leshie Chandrapala, the daughter of bus driver Ranjith Chandrapala, 64, who died on May 3, during the pandemic’s first wave.

Kenyon begins this story in Sri Lanka, where 14-year-old Ranjith dreamed of living in Britain and of riding one of London’s famous red buses. He later migrated to the UK, started a family, and worked in various trades before becoming a proud London bus driver in 2007.

Ranjith drove the 92 bus-route that began and ended at Ealing’s Central Middlesex Hospital in west London. As Kenyon explains, “Ranjith was in effect the ferrying service for frontline medical staff and the sick”. But when it came to workplace protections from the deadly coronavirus, Ranjith and his colleagues were left defenceless.

Leshie describes her father, denied hand sanitiser at work, scrubbing his hands so frequently that they became “cracked and wounded... they bled”. Unable to source medical grade face masks, Leshie bought her father a lycra mask from Amazon, “so it wasn’t medical grade, and it definitely wasn’t suitable for someone working in such a dangerous environment.”

In addition to the risk of infection from passengers and from common “touch points” on bus vehicles, there were frequent bus changeovers between drivers. Back at the garages, Kenyon explains, drivers shared crowded canteens, mess rooms and toilets.

Potters Bar driver Kevin Mustafa recalls busy sign-on areas and ferry cars (taking drivers to their bus vehicles) that breached social distancing guidelines. A ferry car driver whose identity is protected by a voice actor, explains she took up to 25 drivers—in ones, twos and threes—in the same small vehicle each day, with no masks, inadequate cleaning, and poor

ventilation. University College London’s Professor John Ashton tells Kenyon this is a recipe for COVID transmission, “This is absolutely shocking, and in my view completely negligent.”

“Did the drivers die as a result of their job?”, Kenyon asks pointedly, “Because if they did, the way is open for a raft of civil lawsuits.” In the name of “operational efficiency” and “mileage”, bus drivers tell Kenyon that companies made concerted efforts to conceal infections and to victimise drivers for speaking out.

Sacked Cricklewood driver David O’Sullivan, a member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, is currently waging a prominent public campaign for his reinstatement. He tells *FileOn 4*, “There was a hostile environment created, where anyone who wanted to raise concerns about their health and safety were regarded as troublemakers.”

The BBC cites TfL’s claims about a range of “safety interventions” introduced on the buses in the lead-up to lockdown, but O’Sullivan rejects this narrative: “The limited measures that were taken by the company were only after drivers took safety into their own hands.” When drivers began cordoning off front passenger seats as a social distancing measure, he explains, they were “taken off the buses and disciplined for such actions.”

Potters Bar driver Kevin Mustafa concurs. He picks up the story 17 days after lockdown, with more drivers becoming ill and dying from COVID, “We sadly found out that a member of staff had died from COVID. That’s when my safety mind kicked in. I felt there was nothing being done... It was time for someone to step in and take the lead because no-one was taking responsibility. So, I walked the garage and did a risk assessment.”

He tells Kenyon, “I typed it up, I provided it to the manager at the garage, and then social distancing started to appear. Tables were being moved out of the mess rooms and seats were being spaced out with one-way systems being implemented and that was everything I suggested needed doing, and more.” Kenyon’s voiceover cuts in, “But why, says Kevin, should it have required his intervention?”

An especially strong part of the programme is Kenyon’s reference to a “controversial declaration” made by the bus companies, TfL and Unite the union, “known as the tripartite letter”. It was issued to drivers on April 7, 2020 with signatories, including Unite’s lead officer for buses John Murphy, declaring that routine use of PPE, including facemasks, should be reserved for medical personnel and “is not recommended for transport workers”.

Khan appeared on ITV’s *Good Morning Britain* to deliver the news, his words provoking stunned outrage among London’s public transport workforce: “We’ve chased this [with Public Health England] as recently as yesterday and their advice is clear, public transport workers should not be wearing PPE.”

Back at the garages, as Mustafa explains, “We were begging for it, saying ‘please, we need some sort of protection. We need sanitiser, we need masks’, but nothing was forthcoming. If doctors and nurses needed masks to protect themselves from COVID, when we’re dealing with hundreds of different people on our buses every single day, then we needed that protection too.”

Jenny, the ferry driver who joined London buses in 1979 and whose husband is clinically vulnerable, tells Kenyon, “I can remember at the very start of the pandemic, I was actually told by a manager that if you came into work wearing a mask, you’d be disciplined.” *Why?*, asks an incredulous Kenyon, with Jenny replying, “It’s because it didn’t suit the company’s image, did it? This is what I’m saying, they didn’t seem to be taking it seriously at all.”

That the union’s tripartite letter became notorious was largely due to the efforts of the *World Socialist Web Site*. On April 10, the WSW published a condemnation of Unite’s letter, declaring it proof that the union was operating on behalf of the bus companies, Khan and Boris Johnson’s Conservative government. The article was shared by drivers across London. It concluded, “The collaboration of Unite with the companies and the Johnson government makes clear the urgent need for workers to take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file committees to ensure safe working conditions.”

While the BBC’s programme does not investigate this aspect of the story, it does feature comments from O’Sullivan, a founding member of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee formed in September 2020. The Committee’s members at Cricklewood and other garages issued statements opposing Unite’s collusion with TfL and the bus companies and calling for united action by workers to protect health, safety and lives. Their statements were published on the WSW.

*FileOn 4*’s programme includes the damning words of Professor Ashton, “I believe the reason they said that PPE wasn’t needed for transport workers at the outset was because they didn’t have sufficient PPE and they weren’t sufficiently minded to look out for that group of workers. The advice was based on the availability, not on the scientific evidence.”

Kenyon asks, “What about [the bus operators] saying they were just following national guidance?” The professor’s reply is unambiguous, “The health and safety regulations in this country, for a long time, have placed the responsibility on employers, with a duty of care to their own workforce. It’s not for them to offload that responsibility onto others. It defies belief that they wouldn’t realise what a risky position they are in when they are ferrying the general public around.”

In January, as a second wave of infections swept garages, O’Sullivan, whose daughter has a heart condition, was informed that up to 12 drivers at Cricklewood had caught Covid. He sought to alert fellow drivers. After his repeated attempts to flag safety breaches were ignored by Metroline, O’Sullivan phoned work. He explained he would not be reporting for duty, citing his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act.

Kenyon picks up the story from here, explaining that O’Sullivan’s warning of a “cluster” of infections had actually *underestimated* the spread of Covid at Cricklewood. “A later Freedom of Information request... showed that from October 2020 to January, there were actually 46 cases at his garage.”

The programme explains that O’Sullivan distributed leaflets informing his co-workers of their rights under the Act, and that Metroline dismissed him. “Metroline says it was because he was damaging their reputation by spreading inaccurate information and that he was attempting to instigate a mass walkout at the garage. His case is now going through an employment tribunal.”

The bus companies, along with TfL and Mayor Khan, have denied that workplace transmission is responsible for COVID-19 infections and

deaths among London bus workers. But the BBC’s investigation strongly suggests otherwise. As Kenyon concludes, “No-one can prove that Ranjith, or any other driver for that matter, died at work, but the likelihood could hardly be higher.”

Leshie says of her father’s death, “I am 100 percent certain. Every part of my being knows that he died from being in that bus, catching COVID in that bus, and being in a workplace setting, because he wasn’t doing anything else, he wasn’t seeing anyone else. I’m really sure.”

It is Leshie’s words that are chosen to end *FileOn 4*’s programme, “I know that he was worried every day going to work, and that he caught it and died from it whilst he was on a week-long shift.

“And there’s no getting away from that fact. That truth is ingrained in my body now, and I won’t stop until I get answers and I get corroboration of what I know was happening to Dad. And those bus drivers deserve that acknowledgement of that truth. You can put it off, but the truth will out, and I really believe that—that they can’t hide from it.”

The BBC’s programme raises fundamental issues. How are the conditions facing bus and transport workers to be remedied and justice achieved?

To the extent that *FileOn 4* suggests a way forward for bus workers, this centres on the call by whistleblower Michael Liebreich for a Royal Commission into COVID deaths. A former TfL board member and potential Conservative contender for Mayor of London, Liebreich has exposed systemic failures, incompetence and neglect by TfL of transport workers’ safety throughout the pandemic. His proposals are echoed in the programme by calls for a public inquest.

But no state inquiry has ever delivered justice. The recent experience at Grenfell bears witness to the real purpose of all such official enquiries—to politically nullify and dissipate working class opposition and protect the guilty.

The deaths among London bus workers are an expression of the social, economic and political failure of capitalism. More than 4.7 million people have died during the pandemic, as governments the world over, aided and abetted by the pro-company trade unions and labour and social-democratic parties, have enforced a herd immunity agenda allowing the uncontrolled spread of a lethal virus.

Workers and their families can only achieve justice and eradicate COVID-19 through relying on their own independent strength. Not appeals to the very capitalist state authorities who are responsible for mass deaths, but the formation of mass organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, based on scientific knowledge and informed by a genuine socialist programme, to overthrow capitalism and reorganise society on the basis of social need not profit.

#### **What you can do**

- Read O’Sullivan’s latest campaign statement
- Donate to the CrowdJustice campaign
- Send a message of support
- To provide information relevant to O’Sullivan’s unfair dismissal case, or to request more information about O’Sullivan’s defence campaign, please contact: londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**