

Victimised driver David O'Sullivan wins support at Tottenham and Stockwell bus garages: "We are right behind you!"

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Bus drivers at Tottenham and Stockwell garages in London have voiced their support for bus driver David O'Sullivan, sacked by Metroline earlier this year for upholding his colleagues' rights to a safe workplace during the coronavirus pandemic.

O'Sullivan campaigned at Tottenham garage in north London on Saturday where around 300 drivers are employed by Arriva. He spoke with drivers about the fight for his reinstatement and invited them to attend this Sunday's international online webinar, "How to end the pandemic: The case for eradication". O'Sullivan is due to speak at the event alongside a panel of scientists and public health experts.

Drivers gathered around O'Sullivan as he explained the events that led to his sacking at Cricklewood garage. He explained that 69 London bus workers have died from COVID-19 during the pandemic and pointed to the recent death of Stockwell driver Cesar Cardenas, warning "the pandemic is not over."

"All that you are telling me is new," one of the drivers replied, "How come we do not know this? Why are we kept in the dark?" He took a flyer for Sunday's meeting, saying, "It's important what you are giving out about COVID. We have no one who defends us. When we go into work we are on our own. The union is sitting in their offices doing nothing and when we go out, we are again on our own. We are totally like the self-employed."

"The route I am on is terrible. We get spat on and regularly verbally abused. But the union do nothing. So, I see how they have sided with management in your case. The same thing with COVID, we have no protection at all. No safety checks, whether in the morning or late at night. The management have a free hand. I want to see how the London Rank and File Committee works and find out more about your case. I will soon get out of this business as it's getting worse."

Another driver told O'Sullivan he worked at Potters Bar garage for a short time. "There was no safety at all. Buses were going out with no fuel caps and any complaints from the driver we are told to shut up. So I left and I am here at Tottenham which is more of the same. At Potters Bar there was a driver, Kevin Mustafa, who did try to help out, but he was on his own. You have to challenge Metroline. They are the worst out of a really bad lot."

The driver agreed the pandemic was an ongoing threat and pointed to the lack of safety protections, "We have dirty buses and the driver's seat is loose and uneven. Really unsafe. And we can't say no, we are told to get it out. And no gloves, the masks are the cotton ones we have to wash. We seem to be going backwards."

Another driver condemned Unite's recent pay deal with Arriva: "I do not need the union because they do not do anything for us. If we

had someone who is genuine and fights in our interest that would be different. They have meetings with the management on how drivers will accept this bad deal. We got 1 percent and £500 cash. This is no good at all when heating is going up by 10 percent at least, food is going up, petrol also, and the union push us to accept 1 percent.

"I have not been following the COVID situation closely, but I know that it is on the rise, so any information about how we can get rid of it [is good]. You believe it can be eradicated--that is important, I have never heard of that before. I will see if I am not working on that day and sign in."

Several drivers signed-up to receive more information about the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and told O'Sullivan they were interested in attending Sunday's online event.

Stockwell garage

At Stockwell garage in south London, dozens of drivers took copies of statements distributed by members of the Socialist Equality Party, "*Reinstate London bus driver David O'Sullivan! For a safe workplace against Covid-19! No to victimisations!*" and a flyer advertising Sunday's online event "*How to end the pandemic: case for eradication*". Drivers and other garage staff welcomed the *World Socialist Web Site* initiative. One driver told campaigners, "Thank you for your work. I pinned the leaflets on the notice board!"

Bus drivers spoke with sadness about the recent death of their colleague Cesar Cardenas from COVID-19. They were angered by the lack of health and safety protections at the garage and praised O'Sullivan for alerting his co-workers to the spread of infections and for using Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act. They slammed Unite for not defending bus drivers during the pandemic and said the union was working with management.

O'Sullivan had visited Stockwell the previous fortnight and drivers said they had read information distributed at the garage, via leaflets and social media. Several drivers held up their mobile phones displaying articles about O'Sullivan's case and the death of Cesar Cardenas.

A driver who stopped to talk said, "I don't think it is very fair on him at all. I mean, at the moment, it is David O'Sullivan, but it could be me in the future or somebody else. So, I am so pleased that people like you are standing up for drivers because if not, they would just

walk over us easily. You are doing a great job to fight for him and I am here to support as well.

“During the pandemic, there has been no safety for bus drivers. We had Cesar that died. Apparently, he died of COVID. I didn’t know. I was driving with him on the eleventh [of August], we shared a coach. So when I heard this it scared me a lot. We need people like you because last year there was no safety at all for the bus drivers, we were in god’s hands. There wasn’t anything like the cleaning that was needed.

“Most cases I hear the drivers saying, ‘Oh the union is rubbish’, etc. True, I don’t think they do anything. They don’t care about us. Some of us have families, we work to put food on the table. If I catch COVID at work I could bring it home to them god forbid. I don’t think they are doing much about that.

“I wish to say to Dave that I hope he can win this case as this will set a big example to the management and whoever is responsible. I pray and I hope and encourage you guys not to give up and to fight until they win this case.”

A driver who has worked on the London buses for 13 years spoke about the recent death of his colleague, “Cesar was a very nice guy and a great colleague of mine, he sadly passed away from COVID. He was in intensive care for a good four weeks. We did not know. The company did not tell us anything about the guy. They tried to hide this. We only knew about Cesar the day he passed away-and that was when we heard about him.”

The driver explained the garage had recently lost another driver, Tony Williams, who died from a blood clot. “These two drivers were colleagues and friends of ours, lovely guys. We feel sorry we lost them, and we feel scared about our safety, because if they’re not protecting us from these kinds of diseases the company is not really doing the right job.

“At the end of the day there are too many drivers, over 50 drivers, off sick from COVID. They’re not telling us about them, they’re not protecting us, they are not putting in any sort of measures for us to be safe. It is sad because once you work in an industry and you feel unsafe, it is harming all of us.

“That’s why I feel very strongly about supporting David O’Sullivan for his campaign and I am behind him all the way. Good luck to you David! Anything you want us to do, we are right behind you. You tell us what we need to do and we will support you all the way.”

SEP members explained the initiative taken up by O’Sullivan and other drivers to form the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. The driver responded, “A rank-and-file committee would be a good idea because we need someone to protect us, who will be able to support us and to join us all together, because at the moment we are scattered everywhere. We need to be together. I am buying my own sanitiser. I am spending a lot of money to protect myself because my health comes first. Because if I can’t protect myself, then I cannot continue to support my family. This is the number one priority for me.

“I want to speak to the unions and get them to put a marble stone plaque to all the drivers who have passed away outside the garage. I will force them to do it, believe me!”

A driver who has worked for 30 years on the London buses told our campaign team, “I think it is terrible what has been going on. There is definitely not enough protection for the drivers. The cabs aren’t as clean as they like to make out. There is definitely slacking off as time goes by, and Cesar’s death was absolutely tragic. He was such a nice bloke. I’d known him for 20 years. We always chatted together, he was so lovely. He was only a young guy, 46. He was only a few years

younger than myself. It was terrible.”

Speaking about the unions, he added, “I am not sure what’s going on with them. There doesn’t seem to be an awful lot happening in the background, it just seems non-existent. There is no fight for us, we walk in and walk out and there is no-one to say you haven’t been given this, or you haven’t been given that.

“I would say that 20 percent of people are wearing masks, 80 percent of people don’t wear masks. There is no point trying to say to people you need to wear a mask, because basically at the moment people believe that COVID is over, and they don’t realise it is still going on. They don’t know we’ve just lost a driver within the last month. If they knew, they might be a bit more shocked.

“Passengers, the way they act when they get on and off the bus, they act like it’s all over. The government is worried more about the economy than it is about people’s lives. It seems to me that if you’re rich, you’re going to survive, if you’re poor you are going to face all the problems of the world head on. Especially when it comes to COVID.”

A female driver was shocked about the dismissal of O’Sullivan. “I am incensed that something like this has happened to somebody in this day and age. We are in a global pandemic and people are dying. It’s affecting drivers and he has lost his job for it. It’s disgraceful. And they are not really saying anything about it. I see this happening a lot in management. They don’t see drivers as people but as numbers, everything is stats and numbers. It is a disgrace. There is no other word for it.”

Another driver said, “You’ve got to think about why TfL [Transport for London] split up the London buses in this way. Because every company is going to go for their best interests, to win the most money they can. One company goes on strike, another company will cover the mileage. The union has shares in the company so it’s in their interest that the strikes don’t go ahead. It’s common across most of Unite and other unions, not just the bus companies.”

O’Sullivan spoke to the WSWs yesterday, thanking drivers at Stockwell and Tottenham for their support: “It means a lot. It shows the widespread opposition developing in the working class to the sacrifice of our lives and safety in the pandemic. This opposition must be informed by science. We need to organise a rank-and-file movement of bus workers themselves to protect ourselves from COVID and launch a fight for decent pay and conditions. Like the pandemic itself, this fight is global. Sunday’s meeting with scientists and workers such as myself will be crucial in and I urge you to attend.”

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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