

David O’Sullivan campaigns at Battersea depot: drivers report ongoing threat from COVID-19

Miles Driver and Laura Tiernan
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Victimised London bus driver David O’Sullivan spoke with dozens of his colleagues at Battersea depot in south London on Saturday, distributing leaflets about his unfair dismissal from Cricklewood garage.

O’Sullivan was sacked by Metroline on February 3 for defending workers’ health and safety rights during the pandemic. He was suspended after he warned drivers about a cluster of infections at the garage and for citing his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act. The company accused O’Sullivan of spreading “false and damaging information” and of “inciting unlawful industrial action”.

On Saturday, drivers at Battersea stopped to talk with O’Sullivan and took information about his case along with a statement issued last week by the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee, “Organise a fightback for higher wages! End sweatshop exploitation!”

They told O’Sullivan conditions at the depot are terrible, with longer hours and shorter break times pushing them to the limit. Management has responded to driver shortages by imposing harsh new shifts with little notice, and driver fatigue is rife. Drivers condemned Unite the union, saying it was doing nothing to defend them.

Many drivers were shocked when O’Sullivan told them that 70 London bus workers have died from COVID-19. In April 2020, Battersea driver Nicu Enciu, 52, became the sixteenth London bus driver to die from COVID-19, leaving behind a wife and two daughters. Abellio refused to allow workers to pay their respects with a drive-by at the depot.

Battersea depot is operated by Abellio and suffered the second-highest rate of COVID-19 infections among bus garages across London. Between October 2, 2020 and August 3 this year, 92 drivers at Battersea contracted COVID-19. Only Blue Triangle’s River Road garage in East London, owned by Go-Ahead, suffered a higher number of cases, with 115 workers infected over the same period.

Abellio operates five major rail franchises across the UK and 740 buses on 52 London routes, accounting for eight percent of London bus services. It employs 16,000 people in the UK and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Netherlands transport giant NS with 39,000 staff across Europe, including France, the Netherlands and Germany.

A Battersea driver told O’Sullivan, “I have worked here for six years. When you are new, you are told you have to wait before you can demand something—now here we are, so give me what I want. But we are offered a 2 percent pay deal. We are paid £14.90 an hour and at weekends we get a little bit more, but our shifts are terrible. I start now at 13:00 hrs and finish at 22:00 hrs tonight, and then start at 07:50 tomorrow morning. That is terrible—only 10 hours between shifts—and that does not count to and from home and back to work.”

The same driver explained, “I have a lot of responsibilities. I have very young children and my wife is on a permanent graveyard shift as a nurse. So yes, we are both on the front line of COVID, and badly paid.

“Your case shows how the company is able to sack us for no good reason at all. At our garage, a driver was sacked for simply going home to use the toilet during the pandemic as shops and places where we usually go were closed. The TfL cubicle was out of order, so he went to the closest point to the bus destination. But because it took a little longer, he got sacked just for that. And the union did not defend him, the union is useless. So, I understand why you had no support from the union.”

The driver agreed bus workers face an ongoing threat from COVID-19 and said conditions at Battersea are unsafe, “We only get the minimum PPE [personal protective equipment] from the company, three company masks which we have to keep clean ourselves. That’s it. Even the wet wipes we used to get have stopped and now we have to supply all these things ourselves. I know a few drivers, Filipinos, who have been a victim of COVID and have passed away due to COVID.

“I think three drivers at this garage have died. One was Romanian and the other two were Filipinos. There should be safety precautions but there’s nothing.” The same driver reported that an engineer from the depot was currently off sick with COVID and expressed concern for his welfare. He said the company and Unite were concealing information about new infections. “I will sign up to this and check it out,” he said, taking information about the London Bus Rank-and File-Committee.

Another driver explained he had caught COVID-19 the previous year, “I was off sick during the first wave of the pandemic in April, when it was new to us all. I reported it, following the company’s sick policy, saying I could not come in because I had

COVID symptoms. They put me on record and called me for an interview and gave me a verbal warning which would stay on the record for the next six months. They said this was also due to the fact that I was late once, so I was cautioned for the two offences.

“But even though I was late, this was due to the lockdown and fewer [bus] services available, as I rely on public transport to get to work. The buses were arriving packed and could not stop, so I missed the bus to work. I was new then, and on a lower rate of pay as well. This is something which the union does nothing about, and we have to fight on our own now.”

During a campaign at Battersea a fortnight ago, the Unite Health and Safety Rep Judith Katera told O’Sullivan she had spoken to a driver in recent days who was seriously ill with COVID-19. In addition to the engineer reported on Saturday this means two staff members from Battersea have suffered serious cases of COVID-19 in recent weeks. But as at every other garage in London, Unite organises no action to fight the ongoing danger of workplace transmission.

Yesterday morning, the *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Abellio to request information about the number of fatalities at Battersea during the pandemic and the number of infections since October, including current infections at the depot. Our questions to Abellio went unanswered.

Manchester

Members of the Socialist Equality Party campaigned at Go North West’s Queen’s Road garage in Manchester recently, winning strong support for O’Sullivan’s reinstatement. “For speaking out he shouldn’t be sacked,” a driver told campaigners.

Another driver linked O’Sullivan’s fight to their recent dispute against “fire and rehire,” which was isolated and betrayed by Unite earlier this year. “People left after the strike because they don’t like long shifts. The money’s alright, but money can’t buy you happiness. We’ve got to unite together all over the world.”

Half the drivers campaigners spoke with were new, having started since the strike was sold out. Dozens of drivers have sought employment elsewhere in protest at the rotten conditions foisted on them by Unite’s “leverage” team led by Sharon Graham and Len McCluskey.

At Stagecoach’s Hyde Road garage in Manchester, where Unite has rammed through a below inflation pay deal, a driver said angrily, “I’ve just left the union. The first pay ballot was won by 180 votes. Why did the union agree to a re-ballot?” Taking the leaflet on O’Sullivan, he added, “The case of Dave O’ Sullivan is popping up everywhere [on social media].”

Another driver added, “I wish Dave O’Sullivan all the best and feel bad for him losing his job.”

Liverpool

At Arriva’s depot in Bootle, Liverpool, bus drivers also supported O’Sullivan’s fight. One driver said, “His sacking’s wrong. It’s the same here. There’s no protection.”

Another driver had already heard of O’Sullivan’s case and asked, “When he goes to his tribunal, will he be taking letters of support?” SEP campaigners pointed to the crowdfund page online and introduced him to the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee.

Another driver said, “He’s been treated badly. It’s terrible what’s happened to him. I support his fight against his sacking.”

A driver who has worked at Arriva for over 15 years said, “I feel for him and wish him all the luck in the world.” Referring to the lack of COVID-19 mitigations at work, the driver said, “I clean my own bus. The company doesn’t even clean the cabs.”

At Arriva’s Green Lane garage in Liverpool, a driver said, “Anyone who’s come up against what Dave O’Sullivan has faced should be backed up, but we haven’t got the backing of the union. Most of the public don’t know our job, the stresses we deal with.” The driver of five years continued, “There’s two lots of people in this world—the people that have and the people that haven’t.”

Sheffield

Campaigns in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire have also continued over the past fortnight, including at First Bus company in Sheffield, where a driver commented, “Yes I have seen the leaflet about the campaign to get the job back for that London bus driver. It has been passed around the garage and there has been a lot of discussion about it.

“It is both ridiculous and terrible how he has been treated. He was obviously exposing how we have been mistreated over COVID. This affects all of us. All the companies care about is money.

“I agree that drivers should be able to self-isolate on full pay. Why should we be disadvantaged for being sick and preventing others from becoming infected.

“He deserves full backing for the stand he has taken.”

Please donate to David O’Sullivan’s crowdfund appeal and visit the WSWs campaign page for more information.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact