

London bus drivers expose safety breaches amid Omicron surge: “They have sent us to death row”

Our reporters
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London bus drivers say their lives are at risk amid a surge in COVID infections that has seen one in 10 Londoners stricken with the virus. Despite 78 bus workers having been killed by COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, drivers say the situation is worse than ever.

At garages across London, operators are scrambling to fill duties with hundreds of drivers off sick with COVID-19 or self-isolating. This comes on top of an exodus from the bus industry caused by low wages and a toxic culture of management bullying, rampant exploitation, stress, and fear of dying in a high-risk work environment.

Drivers told the *World Socialist Web Site* they are being forced to report for duty despite having COVID symptoms or when they should be self-isolating. New drivers with less than five years’ service are being forced to work with COVID symptoms because they are denied sick-pay and have no other way of supporting their families.

The situation described by drivers across London calls for urgent action. An open letter to workers published on New Year’s Eve by the Socialist Equality Party urged the election of rank-and-file committees at every workplace to defy the unions’ collusion with the Johnson government and fight for collective action to end the pandemic. We invite bus and transport workers who support this call to get in touch.

Drivers’ names have been changed in the interviews to safeguard against victimisation.

Park Royal garage, (London United, RATP Dev)

Sitha said, “Since Omicron developed there has been no announcement by the company of any new measures or precautions. I would say we are around 35/50 drivers short in the garage out of a workforce of up to 300 drivers. No explanation has been provided.

“We are not informed about any infection in the garage. A member of staff tested positive while at work as they had symptoms, but nothing has been said by management. I only know this from another driver.

“The mess room at Scrubs Lane is overcrowded. It accommodated 8 when social distancing applied but now there’s 16. I take my lunch outside.

“They should be introducing lower loading levels for passengers on the buses with the spread of Omicron. The driver’s cabs have not been properly sealed.

“We have lost two drivers at the garage to COVID-19, one of them

was a close friend. The management would not even allow an hour off work for drivers to attend the funeral to pay their respects.

“Unite is hopeless. I have never seen a risk assessment since the start of the pandemic. Drivers from other garages tell me the same. We never saw the buses being properly cleaned. All Unite does is copy and paste the government guidelines and put it on union headed paper. They have sent us to death row.

“The union has only weakened us and allowed the company to take away our terms and conditions. It’s divide-and-rule. The senior drivers are looking at leaving and the company tries to find ways of getting them out while there is such a high turnover of newer drivers who do not stay. The company has become a bullying institution.

“Drivers are under tremendous financial pressure to come into work feeling unwell. I know of drivers who had symptoms but were told to come to work without taking a test. New drivers do not receive sick pay for the first three days. The management has never checked on whether drivers have been vaccinated or boosted.

“All the company is bothered about is mileage and profit. They don’t care how many staff die.

“The government and media are spreading lies that Omicron is milder. How does that add up when more people are hospitalised or dying? This is unacceptable and we must do something about it. I will share the Open letter with other bus drivers and encourage them to get involved with the London Bus Rank and File Committee.”

Northumberland Park garage (Go-Ahead)

Tony said COVID infections are spreading as a direct result of safety breaches by Go-Ahead: “Last Friday, the bus leader [the first bus out of the garage in the morning] told the controller he was not feeling well and was scared he might have COVID. He was told, ‘you’re coming off on your lunch break in about two hours—just do another rounder, take the bus back and then you can go home.’ He left the bus at 8:10 and went home and did a test and found out he was positive for COVID.

“One of my colleagues came into contact with that driver and caught COVID. She got a sore throat and flu symptoms and tested positive on Saturday night. She is very ill right now. She has messaged everybody on WhatsApp to say, ‘anybody who was with me in the ferry car on Friday, I’ve tested positive for COVID-19, so guys, you need to do a

test to find out if you're okay.'

"She has kids and she won't get sick pay for the first three days because she's a new driver. After that she will get less than £100 a week [statutory sick pay]. Only after five years do you get normal sick pay. There's no money coming in and she's asking, 'so what should I do now?'"

"They are keeping COVID infections quiet because we are short of staff. Out of a garage of 700 drivers, we have about 100 missing, because of infections and those self-isolating, but mostly because of the low pay and too much stress. The pay for a bus driver starts at about £11 an hour. It's ridiculous. Go-Ahead made £59 million in profit last year. They are putting drivers at risk and making profit from it.

"The guy I mentioned who had COVID, after he brought the bus back to the depot it was back on the road within a few hours with a different driver."

Tony said that bus vehicles are unsafe as plastic seals around the drivers' cabins are falling apart, "There are gaps in the cabins covered up with Sellotape, but that's all coming off now, so it's not properly sealed at all."

Drivers' safety counts for nothing. "This week an older driver slipped on the bathroom floor because it was wet. His skull at the back was wide open and blood was just flowing out. The toilet was flooded—there's water all over the place because the company doesn't care about anything. I hope the man is alright. There should be a sign or safety cone warning 'the floor is wet'. There should be a safety rep, but we don't have one."

But when it comes to protecting their profits, the companies leave nothing to chance, "We have swipe cards that measure our start and finish times down the last second.

"Last week a passenger jumped in front of the bus and the front glass shattered, but the guy survived and ran off. He was trying to take his own life. The company said, 'okay bring the bus back to the garage', but they didn't even ask the driver whether he needed time off... I mean that's a trauma, you know? And, then he's back the next day driving buses.

"Johnson's policy is herd immunity, which means everyone will get sick—who dies, dies and who lives, lives. It's totally wrong. Nobody should die. The companies claim tax breaks and subsidies, but there's human life in jeopardy. The working class needs to wake up about what's happening around them.

"The union is full of rubbish. They have shares in the companies and support the Labour Party. Sadiq Khan [Mayor of London] comes around and says his dad used to be a bus driver, but he doesn't care about us, he just wants to keep London moving for business."

Cathy caught COVID at work before Christmas: "I was on a break at Dalston Junction in the canteen, which has no windows, no ventilation or fresh air at all. Drivers from Tower Transit and Stagecoach were also coming in and out. I fell ill three days later with a high temperature and flu-like symptoms. I was called by one of the drivers I had been on a break with at Dalston Junction to inform me they had tested positive for COVID. I then received a call from another driver from that day who also tested positive for COVID. My daughter and I both tested positive for COVID and we have infected two other family members. One of them works for a pharmacy and has been double vaccinated and booster jabbed."

Rowan explained, "I know of one driver who had a family friend visit on Christmas Day. A day later she tested positive, so he rang work to ask, 'what's the guidelines on this?' He was asked, 'how are

you feeling?'" and he said he was okay, so far. They told him 'Just come to work then'.

"We have a big fight on our hands with these people. Three days before Christmas they told us by email that they wouldn't recognise Christmas Day as a bank holiday because it fell on a Saturday. They told us we would have to swap Christmas for one of our rest days. I personally think they did it so they wouldn't have to give us a lieu day. It's underhanded in my book. Especially seeing as it was sprung upon us three days before Christmas Day—a lot of drivers did not accept this."

Asked whether the union opposed the company's actions, Rowan replied, "The union are useless. They are in the company's pocket."

No risk assessment or PPE has been provided to drivers in response to the Omicron surge in London, "They've just got a silly little sign saying, 'wear a mask'. They don't implement it, they don't enforce it, they don't do anything. At the start of the pandemic, they had packs with hand sanitiser and wipes. Now there's nothing.

"With regards to the cleaning of the buses, all that's actually done is they are swept and mopped. No special formula is used within the cab. Sellotape is put across the drivers' cab door stating it's been properly done. That's all crap. Nothing is done.

"They think because we are drivers, we do not have a brain. If we do step out of line to try and address the situation, it's guaranteed they will find a way to dismiss us. Unfortunately, I have to say that Go-Ahead are crooks and always have been. They think about nothing more than the mileage and money. Drivers mean nothing to them.

"The union is not worth putting money in to be honest. You take a union rep into any kind of disciplinary hearing or any kind of meeting with management and you can forget it, because you're just taking an extra person in who's going to side with the management. That's the way it goes."

For more information about the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee please contact: londonbusrankandfile@protonmail.com



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