

Video message from David O’Sullivan to striking Maharashtra bus workers wins support

Our reporters
10 April 2022

A video message from London Bus Rank-and-File Committee leader David O’Sullivan to striking bus workers in Maharashtra, India has reached thousands of viewers, receiving warm support among striking workers.

Since it was published on YouTube last Thursday, O’Sullivan’s message of international working-class solidarity has reached more than 14,000 viewers, with 815 Likes and 77 comments.

The overwhelming majority of the comments come from the Maharashtra bus workers who have fought with determination and courage since the start of their indefinite strike on November 4, 2021.

Viewership grew by 1,000 each hour at its peak on Thursday. The rate of increase has slowed, but the video is still being shared on social media, with a further 2,000 views over the weekend.

On Thursday, the Bombay High Court ordered the striking bus employees back to work by April 22. The court refused the strikers’ main demand: that Maharashtra’s state government absorb them as government employees to stave off plans to privatise the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC).

Anger at the court’s ruling erupted Friday as hundreds of striking MSRTC workers protested outside the private residence of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar, denouncing his refusal to help them. According to the *Indian Express*, Pawar’s daughter and fellow NCP politician Supriya Sule tried to placate the protestors but failed.

The workers tried to storm Pawar’s residence, with police arresting 104 strikers and later charging 132 people. Pawar joined senior ministers in Maharashtra’s state government coalition in denouncing the strikers’ actions. The MVA coalition is led by the far-right Shiv Sena alongside the NCP and Indian National Congress.

Home Minister Dilip Walse Patil, from the NCP, ordered Mumbai Police Commissioner Sanjay Pandey to enforce the toughest measures against the “instigators” of Friday’s protest. The next day, police cleared striking workers from the Azad Maidan, a famous sports ground in the centre of Mumbai,

where MSRTC strikers were based since last November.

A protester at the Maidan told the *Express* Friday, “We have been protesting at Azad Maidan for over five months now, but nobody listened to us. Pawar is responsible for the suicides of the workers”.

Dozens of strikers have reportedly committed suicide since last November, the outcome of the strike’s isolation by the major Stalinist-led trade union federations and “left” parties that have refused to mobilise workers in their defence.

In comments left on YouTube, the Maharashtra bus workers register their heartfelt thanks to O’Sullivan. Others provide information about their struggle and its hardships, sometimes explaining the political isolation they have experienced, as well as their hopes for the outcome of the strike. A few ask for more information about how the rank-and-file committee can assist.

Comments include:

- Thank you sir for your support FROM ALL STAFF OF MSRTC KURLA NEHRUNAGAR DEPO MUMBAI DIVISION
- Thank you very much sir, you listened to these employees but the government is not ready to listen. Now surfcourt is the only resort.
- Thanks from India. The main reason of extension of strike is almost all media is bribed by govt. And news is always in the favour of govt. So that all the public should think negative about workers
- Thanks for supporting us sir... Our State government is good for nothing.
- I am also a bus driver and I am a real person. We are sitting on strike for more than five months. Thank you for the news... we will not end the strike until the government accepts our demands.
- 350 deaths on duty during pandemic of COVID -19, and 120 suicides of staff so far. Yet govt. is not serious. MSRTC workers really seems helpless! How could this organisation help?
- Another striker described the workers having suffered an “explosion of [the] last 20 years of bad behaviour by the administration and every government. It is also an explosion of

inequality. It is also an explosion of... stress, poverty, basic needs, mental health... more work and less money.”

In London, bus drivers have responded warmly to the video, sharing it on social media and leaving emoticons to show their support. A selection of interviews gathered from London bus drivers is included below:

Dixon, a bus driver from West London said, “They promote India as the world’s biggest democracy and yet they treat workers in this manner. The workers obviously must have voted to strike, so how can the Bombay High Court repeatedly rule to make their strike illegal? They are going with the BJP and other ruling parties.

“It is like when [former prime minister] Margaret Thatcher came to power, she introduced laws to make it virtually impossible to strike. It’s completely manipulated. Our rights are so watered down.

“It has been reported that 700,000 people have left the Unite union [Britain’s second largest trade union]. They have left simply for the fact that these unions do not do what they are supposed to. The Maharashtra drivers have several unions, but it seems they are going along with the state government. It is a very poor excuse for the Maharashtra state government to say they have no funds.

“They cannot say they have no money. Maharashtra is the state where you have Bollywood. Bombay is the business capital of India, and the commercial hub—home to the Bombay Stock Exchange. It’s the richest state in India.

“I’m amazed this has not appeared on Al Jazeera or the BBC. This is 96,000 workers on strike, and they are simply not showing it. Are we heading for civil disorder? It seems we are. It’s happening around the world. Are we going to see the 96,000 bus workers camp outside the court? How can they justify that? Over 300 of the bus workers died from COVID-19 and then ordering them back to work like this?

“Stick it out. It needs worldwide exposure. Here in West London, we had bus drivers and other locals supporting the Indian farmers. They had stickers saying, ‘No farmers, No food’. What we need here is something similar worldwide for transport workers, stepping in and highlighting that we are in support of transport workers all over the world. We are key workers and should not be subjected to this treatment.

“Look at the P&O ferry dispute: they are paying £5.15 an hour for skilled workers. It’s happening everywhere. I understand there is a war, but fuel and other costs are going up. A reporter interviewed a lady here last week who couldn’t afford the cost of fuel—she was heating her baked beans using candles. Are we getting to that stage? I can’t believe it. We are basically fighting just to survive. Everything’s going up, but our wages are not.”

A driver from Go-Ahead said, “It’s wonderful that Dave did the video, because you would never think someone would do that from here. It’s really appreciated because he makes people understand what’s happening around the world. And it’s not

easy. But it’s great he did that.

“They should keep fighting. The government has money, and they should come up with a better negotiating position for the bus drivers. Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, gave a lot of money to Sri Lanka. He wants them to exit from China. India is saying they will support Sri Lanka on the financial side because they don’t want China to have too much influence.

“If we are not going to stand up, we will be in the same position as those bus workers in India. It’s already here. See what’s happened at Brixton? They told them to go back to work [using the threat of anti-strike legislation]. It’s the same thing.”

Jason, a bus driver from Norwich, said, “I was very moved by Dave’s appeal for the Maharashtra bus workers’ struggle. It was very informative and important to bring to workers’ attention everywhere—another piece of genuine investigative journalism by the WSWs. There has been no coverage of this in the mainstream media which is nothing more than a propaganda service for the government.

“The first thing I thought is, this is what they have in mind for all workers, to strip us of everything. Things were bad before the pandemic but now it’s worse and this goes for the so-called Western democracies. We are not truly free.

“Maharashtra bus workers and the stand they are taking is an example for us all. The unions act as henchmen for the companies and government so they can get some of the corporate pie, they are not out for the workers. Anyone trying to change things in these organisations will just be come down on and framed up on bogus charges.

“This is part of an international struggle. It should spread all over the world. That is 100 percent necessary. This is what the rank-and-file committees is all about and the reason for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. It has certainly changed my views since becoming involved. Rather than seeing ourselves as a tiny cog we are part of a bigger picture, a more powerful social force. I did not believe you could effect change in this way and unless we do this moving forward, we can kiss everything we have goodbye.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact