

Bus drivers face 40+ degrees cabin heat: “We are so undervalued. We’re treated worse than cattle”

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If you are a bus driver or engineer, we want to hear from you! Contact us by filling out the form at the end of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Bus drivers have been directed to report for work during Britain’s first ever red warning for extreme heat, despite vehicles being supplied without air-conditioning. By mid-afternoon Monday, temperatures inside drivers’ cabins were hitting 40-plus degrees centigrade (104+ Fahrenheit), with Unite suppressing any collective action to defend drivers’ health and safety.

A red warning for extreme heat was issued by the Met Office, Britain’s national meteorological service, late last week. It is the highest-level warning, defined as “dangerous weather” posing a “risk to life”. The Met advised, “You should avoid travelling, where possible, and follow the advice of the emergency services and local authorities.”

But millions of key workers have been forced today into dangerously overheated workplaces, in defiance of all public health warnings.

Temperatures in much of England reached 36 degrees by early afternoon. Bus drivers in London shared images of thermometer readings above 40 degrees inside their cabins. “It’s hotter inside than outside” a driver from Brixton in south London said, describing his bus as a “greenhouse on wheels”.

Transport for London (TfL) advised the public to “only travel if essential” on Monday and Tuesday. Much of Britain’s infrastructure is unable to withstand extreme heat, with railway tracks buckling, roads melting, and poorly air-conditioned rolling stock, bus vehicles and buildings. Tomorrow will be even hotter, reaching 39 degrees.

TfL announced over the weekend that it had a “comprehensive hot weather plan in place” to “keep

services running and to keep staff and customer safe”. But London bus drivers have responded angrily, saying TfL has once again prioritised mileage and profits over their own lives and the safety of passengers.

A driver from Go Ahead’s Merton garage in south London told WSWs, “They don’t care about us drivers, not one little bit. We’re just a number to them, not a name. It really is soul destroying, going up and down the route and knowing the company don’t care one bit for our safety and wellbeing.”

Extreme heat carries the risk of heat exhaustion, with symptoms including nausea, heavy sweating and feeling faint. If left untreated, this can develop quickly into heat stroke, a fatal condition where the body is unable to cool itself. Heat stroke can lead to confusion, altered mental state, slurred speech, loss of consciousness and coma.

Other risks from heat exposure are rhabdomyolysis which causes muscle death and kidney rupture. Heat syncope can lead to fainting episodes or dizziness due to dehydration. Passengers, pedestrians and other road users are at immediate risk if a driver succumbs to any of these conditions.

Despite the serious medical consequences of heat exposure, there is no legal limit on maximum temperatures at work in the UK. It’s illegal to transport cattle above 30C degrees under European Union law, but no such protections exist for workers.

The Trades Union Congress, whose president Frances O’Grady sits on the Bank of England’s Court of Directors, is calling for maximum workplace temperatures to be set at 30C degrees “or 27 degrees for those doing strenuous jobs”(!) But the Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) recommends 13°C for heavy work in factories, 16°C for light work in factories, 18°C in hospital wards and shops and 20°C in offices and

dining rooms.

Bus companies and their shareholders are being handed cash by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan for operating a brutally unsafe service. Go Ahead, Arriva, Metroline, and other operators have trumpeted their largesse today in dispensing free bottles of water and allowing drivers to forego company uniform. But their insistence that drivers submit to punishing rosters in oven-like conditions shows their overriding objective.

On Friday, Unite the union issued guidance to its bus officers and reps titled “Working in Hot Weather: Health and Safety Unit Briefing.” Its document is a travesty, with drivers effectively left to their own device.

Unite’s briefing cites the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 that “the temperature in all workplaces inside buildings shall be reasonable.” It makes clear that under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, employers have general duties to “assess and control risks from work under the Management of Health, Safety, and Welfare Regulations (MHSWR). These legal requirements also cover working outside in the heat.”

Unite provides a long list of safety measures that “employers should do” to reduce the risk of heat exposure, including “monitor temperature and humidity, and workers’ responses at least hourly in hot environments” and “halt work altogether in extreme conditions”. But Unite is doing nothing to enforce them.

Unite’s advice states that employers “should be now carrying out risk assessments to put in place protective measures or even consider stopping work at least in the hottest part of the day.” Yet drivers across London say no such risk assessments have been done—a clear breach of operators’ legal duty of care.

As usual, this pro-company union will do nothing to challenge the bus companies’ prerogative to reap profits at drivers’ expense. Unite’s guidance concludes with advice for stopping work on health and safety grounds. It advises reps to establish a check-list procedure for assessing safety, including halting a task or job “if agreed hot weather will cause detrimental effects to health”, with conditions to be “reviewed by management and union reps”.

Unite concludes that bus drivers may resort to Section 44 and Section 100 of the Employment Rights Act, advising, “Where employers are not operating safely or in accordance with current law and guidance, then an individual can justify leaving the workplace, refuse to return where any danger persists or take appropriate steps to protect themselves.”

But Unite makes clear this right may only be exercised individually and not collectively, “Any such decision would be on the basis of their own decision regarding their workplace as to whether there are ‘circumstances of danger’ which they reasonably believe would be serious and imminent.”

Unite’s message is clear: there will be no overarching fight to establish and enforce basic safety standards, with drivers left to decide on “their own” if the threat to safety is serious and whether to take individual action. But if workers cannot act collectively to bring about change, what is the point of a trade union?

During the pandemic, Unite colluded with the bus companies and TfL to deny drivers’ access to PPE, including face masks. Unite’s partnership with the operators resulted in the deaths of at least 76 bus workers. When David O’Sullivan, a bus driver from Cricklewood garage, tried to alert his colleagues about an outbreak of COVID-19 and asserted his rights to a safe workplace under Section 44, Unite submitted trumped-up evidence against O’Sullivan to get him sacked. O’Sullivan is waging a campaign for his reinstatement.

It is necessary for bus and transport workers to take matters into their own hands. Meetings should be convened at all garages, involving drivers and engineers, to complete a safety audit and ensure that no bus leaves the garage unless its air conditioning system can provide a cool and safe environment. Only through such collective action, in defiance of both company shareholders pro-company unions and the Johnson government, can workplace health and safety be guaranteed while protecting drivers from victimisation.

Tell us what is happening at your garage or workplace and find out about the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee. We can be contacted here.



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