

London bus drivers describe intolerable heat: “All we have been offered by management is a bottle of water!”

Our reporters
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As temperatures reached record highs today across the UK, the World Socialist Web Site spoke with bus drivers in London who described breaches of workplace health and safety that have the potential to endanger lives.

A driver from a London United garage in west London said, “Drivers were booking off and going sick with exhaustion last week when temperatures were around 27 C even before the higher temperatures today.

“All we have been offered by management is a bottle of water! The air conditioning is not working on the ADE’s (Dennis 400) vehicles and drivers have been reporting that on the hybrid buses half of them do not have working air conditioning.

“The trains are being cancelled but the buses stay on the road. This issue over unsafe working temperatures has been going on for 10 to 15 years. They could have been checking the fleet in January ahead of the summer to ensure the air conditioning was working.

“We know for a fact that the belts that drive the air conditioning units have been removed—it has been proven by spot checks. The air conditioning units use more diesel, so the companies are saving money. The cost of diesel is worth more than our welfare and lives.

“There have been no risk assessments. The union has flagged up the issue with the fleet and failures with the air-conditioning, but management has ignored it. All they care about is profit and TfL lets them get on with it.”

A Brixton driver who was waiting to collect his second bus told WSWs, “I am literally soaking wet. I keep a towel and keep pouring cold water over my head. My bus does not have a fan, so it is like a greenhouse, there is no air circulation, it is suffocating.

If it comes to the point that I can’t drive, I will just refuse to drive the bus and go home.

“Tomorrow will be even harder, so today is just a little tease, that’s how it is. It is hotter inside the bus than outside. I reckon it was about 37 degrees inside the cab.”

Asked about the lack of aircon, the driver said, “It is ridiculous—they have not offered any other solution. But if we go home, then it is on our record.

“At night time, when the buses come in, they should charge the aircon the same way they fill them with diesel. How long would that take? There is something that can be done. They don’t want to do it because they don’t want to spend money, they don’t want to lose their end-of-year revenue. But we have to sit in a bus all day long, in a heatwave making money for them.

“They are the ones sitting in an office and they argue with us about wearing a uniform. Most of us are wearing our own clothes just now because they are looser. The T-shirts they provided are not breathable.”

The driver said, “Everyone at Brixton garage was complaining about the aircon. Only 20 percent, the 319s, these are brand new electric buses and they have got cold air. The others are just blowing hot air around.”

A driver from south London’s Stockwell garage said, “It seems to depend a lot on the route. Drivers are saying that with newer buses the aircon seems to be working. The ones that I drive have something, it’s nothing like AC in a car, but others have nothing. That’s the long and short of it, it varies from bus to bus.

“There are a lot of overheating problems, mechanical breakdowns. A lot of the buses on my route should

have been taken off the road five years ago. That was a company and TfL screw up. They bought new buses when the contract was renewed. We drove them under a low bridge for about three weeks, then one driver saw the height warning sign come up and called CentreCom, who said the bus is too high! So they took the nice new buses off the route and gave us the shitty old ones back!”

Speaking about the so-called Boris Buses’ lacking aircon (introduced during the tenure of former Mayor of London and now Prime Minister Boris Johnson), the driver explained, “I haven’t driven one of them for years, but when I used to drive them, they were crap. With the lack of windows and the curved glass at the front, it’s like a goldfish bowl, so the heat in them is something else. When we go up the A3, we are face onto the sunshine, so that will be interesting. The 11s at St Paul’s will be the same. There will be three or four at every company that have got that.”

He said that management at Stockwell Garage had been handing out water to drivers, but commented, “It’s the age-old thing, there is no legal temperature for us. Unless you are in a furnace type environment, there are no time limits.”

Circumstances varied between garages, he said: “Merton and Putney drivers are very strong on temperature. They will just say ‘No, I ain’t driving it’. Stockwell drivers are weaker, you get pressure. What we have been saying to drivers is if there is no aircon and your hands are slipping on the steering wheel, and you can’t drive it anymore then obviously that’s health and safety. If you can’t grip the wheel properly, then they can’t argue with that.”

Controllers will pressure drivers: “I got a message on WhatsApp saying that when they want you to stop the bus to maintain their headways [time between buses], they’ll say ‘take a comfort break.’ In the cab of a bus? They will spin it any way they can.”

Discussing drivers’ options to call in sick because of the heat, he explained, “I don’t think any company gives full pay when you are on the sick. Ours is about 70 percent, but then you are losing your overtime, which drivers are relying on, so you just can’t do it.”

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



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