North London bus drivers strike against extreme heat

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More than 1,500 bus drivers from Arriva North London will begin walkouts this Friday against dangerous working conditions caused by extreme heat. Anger is running high, with a 96 percent strike vote by Unite members across North and East London and Essex.

Drivers will take 15 days of action over the next three months. Temperatures in drivers' cabs this summer have reached above 40 degrees Celsius, risking workers' health and even their lives, while endangering the safety of passengers and road users.

In a strike announcement published this week, Unite stated that many buses in Arriva's fleet do not have air conditioning. They are instead fitted with an inferior "air cooling" system that reduces cab temperatures by only 2 or 3 degrees. These conditions have been known for years.

On Wednesday, drivers at Arriva North London's Tottenham garage told the W*orld Socialist Web Site* that even when the air-cooling system is on, temperatures inside can reach 39 to 40 degrees. Many had seen temperatures above 40°C in recent weeks and one driver said he felt "lucky" his cab was 33°C that day. In many European countries including Spain, that would be well above the legal limit for a workplace.

One driver said, "It gets worse as the aircon often doesn't work. It's even worse for the passengers! The engineers aren't fixing [the AC], which I understand because they're understaffed in this garage." When collecting a bus from the garage, "you don't know if the AC is working, you need to let it run," so drivers are on the road before realising they will be driving in a cabin above 40°C.

Arriva, with an operating profit of £127 million, claims it is "investing in longer-term fixes, including cab air conditioning upgrades." But working conditions are unsafe right now, and workers cannot wait for future "upgrades" while their health suffers.

The extreme heat facing bus drivers is not a sudden and unpredictable disaster. The WSWS reported extensively on the brutal conditions facing bus drivers across London during the 2022 heatwave, when temperatures in some cabs soared to above 50°C, provoking widespread unofficial stoppages.

As in previous heatwaves, Unite has advised drivers that if temperatures are too high, they can refuse to drive, citing Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act. The union has issued a template letter that individual drivers can use for this purpose and has praised London Mayor Sadiq Khan for supporting Unite's letter.

Earlier this summer, Khan told reporters the bus companies had been "instructed by TfL [Transport for London] to make sure that no bus is working unless the air-conditioning and air coolant is working." He added, "Any bus driver that feels their bus is too hot, they shouldn't be driving their buses. They will not be penalised for doing so."

But buses across London continue to operate without AC, while TfL does nothing to rectify the situation. Advising drivers of their legal right to refuse to work in dangerous conditions places the onus for safety onto drivers. This evades TfL's refusal to bring the bus companies to heel, allowing them to prioritise profits over lives.

Many drivers told the WSWS they had already refused or returned buses when the temperature was unsafe, but acting as individuals leaves drivers open to bullying and victimisation.

A driver at Tottenham explained, "Some drivers are scared of complaining. If you keep complaining, you'll be blacklisted—the moment you make a fault you'll be kicked out. … I know a couple of guys who refused to

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take a bus out and they were suspended for a while."

Another added, "Some drivers get penalised" for refusing a bus that's too hot, "that's not right because it's their right." Some drivers had bought their own thermometers to measure temperatures inside their cabs, but management told them to stop "as if they didn't want us to know" before eventually backing down.

"They don't care about us. … They tell us to take comfort breaks, but you stop in the sun, so you don't cool down." His colleague said, "What good is it to take a 20-minute break when you get straight back on a hot bus after it?" When you refuse to take out an unsafe bus, "Nothing happens! That's why we need to do something like this!" (going on strike).

A driver told LBC radio she had tried refusing a bus that was too hot to drive but was told she had "no choice" because an "air-cooling" system was fitted—despite it being totally ineffective. She eventually resigned.

Bus drivers have shared pictures of 45°C temperature-readings inside their cabs in recent weeks. Surrounded by glass, they can face at least 10°C hotter conditions than on the outside.

Extreme heat conditions are widespread across London's franchise operators. "John," a driver at Transport UK (formerly Abellio), was docked pay after returning a bus that was too hot. He told MyLondon that managers later declared it "fit" to drive because the fan in the cab was working, despite the cabin temperature having hit 40°C. The UK Health Security Agency advises, "At temperatures above 35°C fans may not prevent heat-related illness and could worsen dehydration."

Videos shared by drivers on social media show drivers struggling to cool themselves, visibly distressed, with temperatures in their cab reaching above the mid-30s.

The same dangerous conditions exist across London—and face tens of millions of essential workers across Europe and beyond—but Unite is continuing its long track record of divide-and-rule, confining action to Arriva North London while working with Khan and TfL to shield the bus operators from any unified action that would jeopardise their mileage and profits.

Unite's promotion of Khan and his worthless promises must serve as a warning. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Unite signed a tripartite agreement with TfL and the bus companies declaring that PPE including facemasks was "not recommended for transport workers."

Khan, Unite and bus companies entered a partnership to keep services running with no PPE or other protections for the workforce. More than 69 London bus workers died as a result. London's bus drivers died from Covid at a rate similar to frontline nurses. When bus driver David O'Sullivan at Metroline's Cricklewood garage cited his rights under Section 44 to refuse to work in an unsafe environment he was sacked.

In the UK, the law sets no maximum working temperature. In May, the Trades Union Congress urged the government to set a legal maximum of 30°C. In the months since, outdoor temperatures have regularly reached the mid-30s, but the TUC has done nothing to mobilise its 6.6 million members across 47 affiliated unions, merely continuing their ineffective lobbying of the Labour government.

As of July 30, the summer's heatwave had led to 2,900 heat-related deaths in the UK. In Germany, 11,900 heat-related deaths were reported by the Robert Koch Institute through July, while France reported over 5,700 up to July 2. In every country, the brunt of the climate catastrophe produced by capitalism is borne by the working class.

The fight at Arriva must be expanded across London. While the unprecedented Europe-wide heatwave threatens tens of millions of essential workers, corporate giants such as Arriva and the fossil fuel companies are raking in record profits.

The claims by the operators that they have "no money" to refit buses must be rejected. If the bus companies cannot operate a safe service for drivers and passengers, they must be expropriated and their profits used to provide a safe working environment, free from management harassment and with increased pay and benefits for all transport workers.

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