

Workers at Dublin Bus rebel at lack of personal protective equipment

By Dermot Byrne
27 April 2020

The death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic in the Republic of Ireland has reached 1,063, as a further 52 deaths were announced over the weekend. The 377 new cases of COVID-19 take the total to 18,561 confirmed cases in the Irish Republic. A further 294 people have died in Northern Ireland.

As is the universal experience internationally, bus drivers and other public transport workers, who ferry those employed in the health sector and other essential services, have been forced to battle for proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

Hundreds of bus drivers are risking their lives due to the coronavirus. Data released by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) last week attests to the highly dangerous situation drivers face every minute of the day. The HPSC notes that Dublin is the main hotspot of coronavirus cases, with 9,010 (50 percent of all cases). Ireland's second largest city, Cork, accounts for just 1,103 cases (6 percent). Of those for whom transmission status is known, community transmission accounts for 48 percent, close contact (a major issue for bus drivers and transport workers) accounts for 48 percent while travel abroad accounts for 4 percent.

Workers at the state-run Dublin Bus company, and the newer private operated Go Ahead Ireland (GAI) transport company—set up in 2018 with the collaboration of the trade unions—have been forced into withdrawing their labour and not taking buses out due the lack of PPE on Dublin busses and country routes.

At GAI, which in 2018 took over a large number of routes formerly run by Dublin Bus, two drivers were suspended in early April for refusing to work due to the lack of adequate PPE. One of the GAI drivers, Paul Gannon, was suspended after being in isolation for two weeks on doctor's orders for refusing to drive the bus without proper PPE. Another driver told Irish news site

Extra.ie that drivers in Kildare and Offley had no screen protection, no masks and no onboard sanitizer.

Bus workers at GAI have not only had to endure a threat to their lives due to cross infection but have also had to battle against the complicit and collaborationist Services Industrial Professional and Technical Trade Union (SIPTU).

In the face of opposition from bus drivers, SIPTU, in cooperation with the state-sponsored National Transport Authority, was one of the unions who in 2018 negotiated the privatisation of over 10 percent of the state-run service—which led directly to the setting up of GAI with fewer rights and conditions for drivers.

SIPTU moved quickly to ensure that new employees at GAI would be represented by them. Ed Wills, Managing Director of GAI, issued a statement which gave a clear indication of the cosy relationship where unions and bosses cooperate to secure workers compliance: “After a detailed consultation process GAI is pleased to announce an agreement with SIPTU. The agreement ensures our drivers and general operatives are represented in a mutually beneficial manner. We look forward to working alongside SIPTU now and into the future on matters relating to collective bargaining.”

On April 13, drivers represented by SIPTU and the National Bus and Rail Union (NBRU) at Dublin Bus walked off the job despite union opposition. This succeeded in getting a driver reinstated after he had been suspended without pay for refusing to work under conditions in which his life was threatened by the coronavirus. The driver was suspended without pay by Dublin Bus on April 11 for insisting that passengers board at the back of the bus because of the lack of protective screens and protective masks at the front.

Pickets comprising 20 workers were placed on the

main Broadstone depot in Dublin in defiance of the union. The result of the short action was the reinstatement of the suspended driver and the forcing of Dublin Bus to introduce proper protective masks and screens to safeguard drivers.

Stephen Nugent, an official with the NBRU, responded by denying that the strike action ever took place. He told the *Daily Star*, “No driver has been stood down. We have commenced issuing face visors to the drivers, while we continue to explore options for protective screens in the drivers’ cab area for those that don’t already have them.”

WSWS reporters interviewed a driver at Dublin Bus who works out of Donnybrook garage. He outlined the conditions at the depot and the reason for the action taken by bus workers.

WSWS: What was the fear of bus workers for their health and safety before all-out strike action was threatened and pickets were placed on the main depot?

Driver: Many of the drivers were very worried about the fact that when people were boarding the bus, they were coming in close contact with us. There was a real fear of getting the virus and bringing it in to our families. We were demanding proper screens and masks—not just basic masks but proper visors to cover the face. We had heard about bus drivers getting the virus in London and Bradford, and the lack of protection for workers on London transport. We had also heard reports that 20 bus drivers in Britain have died after contracting COVID-19. Many were aware that one of the drivers at Dublin Bus already has a suspected case of the deadly virus.

WSWS: Did the union instigate any action to support the drivers demands?

Driver: No. The driver refused on Friday, April 11 to let passengers board from the front of the bus because of the threat to his health and the lack of proper protective screens and masks.

When he was suspended a group of drivers over the weekend set up a WhatsApp group with the aim of getting him reinstated. A lot of drivers were going to refuse to take cash and were going to load passengers from the rear of the bus.

WSWS: Was there any support from the union?

Driver: No. There is a general feeling the union doesn’t act in the interests of the bus workers. They said a few years ago that they would not allow the

privatisation of bus routes by the government. Then they went ahead and negotiated over 10 percent of the routes to be hived off to private companies where the conditions are even worse for drivers than at Dublin Bus.

We have been fighting for protective screens for a long time, as there are half of the buses without them. Pickets were mounted on April 13, on Monday morning, by 20 drivers to demand the driver’s reinstatement and proper screens and protective masks. The union was not involved. I work out of Donnybrook garage and many drivers were angry and supported the action at Broadstone.

WSWS: Has the situation for drivers improved since the action?

Driver: Well, the situation is still dangerous, but now after the pickets were mounted and all-out strike threatened we are getting the screens we demanded as well as protective masks, and they are going to carry out deep cleaning of the buses.

WSWS: What would you say is the main lesson that drivers have learned from the actions taken by workers over the lack of PPE?

Driver: It is our lives that are on the line. We have had to fight for proper protection. It’s up to drivers to demand protection because the unions will only work with what management wants. They always sell out on wages and conditions. This time our lives are at risk, and we can’t afford the union’s complacency.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>