

The political significance of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee: “Change is coming in the working class”

By our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Miles Driver from Cricklewood garage about the establishment of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Driver has worked in public transport for more than two decades and is a long-time member of the Socialist Equality Party.

“The establishment of this committee is a significant step forward”, Driver said. “Sunday night’s meeting was a powerful demonstration that change is coming in the working class. Bus workers who lost colleagues to COVID-19 spoke and the clear sentiment was ‘enough is enough’.

“In just 12 weeks, from March to the end of May, 33 bus workers were killed by COVID-19. Yet despite crocodile tears from the media, Labour’s Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, and Transport for London (TfL), coronavirus has re-surfaced and our colleagues are falling sick.”

Driver explained how he and a group of colleagues had begun campaigning for a rank-and-file safety committee back in April, with political support from the WSWS. “When the pandemic struck, workers were left defenceless. We only discovered our fellow drivers were dying [from COVID-19] because their relatives went to the media. Unite [the union representing drivers] actively colluded with management to conceal the extent of the health emergency, then sent us back to work.

“The *World Socialist Web Site* was raising the alarm and exposing this cover-up. For example, WSWS uncovered information about the real number of infections and hospitalisations at Cricklewood garage. WSWS articles were read and shared by hundreds of bus drivers because we told the truth.

“In May, after Boris Johnson announced the lifting of the lockdown, Unite supported the return to normal rosters and repeated TfL’s lies that our buses were safe. These lies were recycled by the Socialist Party, whose members operate as a de facto PR agency for Unite. They concealed the unsafe conditions being enforced by the union to suppress any independent opposition from below.

“At Sunday’s meeting drivers described the conditions they are facing--overcrowded buses, social distancing a dead letter, and a complete failure to track and trace. As one colleague said, ‘It’s a crime’.

“We had colleagues from Cricklewood where a driver on route 112 tested positive. Only a handful of drivers on that route were even notified. It’s clear our lives count for nothing. On Monday, one of our committee members reported that an engineer at Cricklewood has been confirmed with COVID-19, yet none of the engineers he worked with have been tested, and one of the apprentices is sick but can’t even get a test.

“We believe workplace transmission is occurring, but Metroline and Unite are engaged in a cover-up. After so many deaths, the companies and the union cannot claim ignorance. Decisions are being made to prioritise profits and a continuation of service over our lives and safety.”

Miles said the formation of the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Committee showed workers were starting to draw a balance sheet from their experiences over the past six months, “As the resolution we adopted makes clear, our colleagues’ deaths were not inevitable. They were the outcome of actions of the Johnson government, TfL, and the bus companies,

backed to the hilt by the union.

“Unite’s collusion with management turned our workplace into a killing zone. Under their agreement with TfL and the bus companies, they were issuing joint letters with management telling drivers they didn’t need PPE. When this was challenged by health and safety reps, they were suspended from the union.

“Bus workers are confronting the reality that Unite, like all the trade unions, no longer represents them in any way. They are an industrial police force for the companies and the government. They defend capitalism. The formation of this committee will enable the working class to fight back.”

Miles said there was strong support for the resolution at Sunday’s meeting, “Colleagues described it as ‘spot on’ and ‘a great start’ in this fight. Drivers have joined from garages across London, sending messages including, ‘We have to do something before it’s too late,’ and calling for united action against the imminent threat from COVID-19. We must build on this and I urge all my colleagues to join the committee.

“The resolution we adopted makes clear this fight goes beyond the bus garages. We are preparing a united offensive by all workers against their employers, Boris Johnson’s Tory government and Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party. They are all pursuing a murderous “herd immunity” policy which is being played out at workplaces and schools throughout Britain. Where is the duty of care? We have millions of kids travelling back to schools, piling onto buses and trains, and this policy is being defended despite more than 850 outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools. And it’s only mid-September!

“The same is true all over the world. In New York City 146 transit workers have already died from COVID-19. And now the policies of Trump and the Democrats are leading to an even bigger disaster. This must be stopped. Regardless of your country, race or nationality, COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting the working class. Ours is an international struggle.”

Motion to free Julian Assange

Sunday’s meeting also adopted a resolution demanding freedom for jailed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange whose extradition hearing is taking place in London. Miles said, “I think it is highly significant that a meeting called over the threat to

workers’ lives from the pandemic also passed a resolution calling for the defence of Julian Assange.

“We have first-hand experience with victimisation and reprisals, whenever we call out the company over unsafe conditions or other grievances. We are classified as ‘key workers’, but we are reminded every single day that our rights and concerns are not important even though the pandemic has shown we are the ones who keep society moving.

“Julian Assange is a case of victimisation writ large. He has acted as a true journalist, making war crimes known to the public based on hard evidence. Julian has pulled back the screen of official politics and exposed what governments really do in the name of the ‘people’.

“The US and Britain have conspired to destroy Assange. He has been framed up on false charges, kept in a cell in a maximum-security prison and denied due process so they can ship him to America where he would not be heard from again.

“This is happening on our doorstep and we must make a stand. Our fight is connected to the defence of democratic rights, such as freedom of the press and freedom of information. You cannot fight for a more equal and just society if you are made to wear a blindfold.

“Like most workers, we recognise that it’s not Julian Assange who should be in the dock. It is governments responsible for illegal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq who should be on trial.”

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