

For a London-wide strike to oppose the threat to life from COVID-19!

By the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee
1 October 2020

The following statement has been issued by the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee in response to the resurgence of COVID-19 infections at London bus garages. Unite the union is working with the bus companies and Transport for London to conceal new infections and divide and suppress opposition from below.

The statement references Unite's current strike ballot at Metroline-only garages over Remote Sign-On (under which drivers would clock-on when they board the bus, rather than at the garage). The strike ballot is silent on the COVID-19 emergency facing drivers and passengers.

The London Bus Drivers Rank and File Safety Committee calls for a London-wide strike of bus drivers to fight the threat to our lives from COVID-19.

A second wave of the pandemic has begun, with new infections already reported by drivers and engineers at Cricklewood, Holloway and Edgware. Across the UK, infections are doubling every week, with scientists predicting 200 deaths a day by November.

We demand immediate measures to protect our health and safety. We cannot allow a re-run of March, April and May, when 33 colleagues died because of deliberate neglect by Transport for London, the bus companies and Unite.

Unite's strike ballot has been called against remote sign-on (RSO) at Metroline garages only. It makes **no mention** of the deaths of our colleagues, or of the renewed spread of coronavirus at the garages. The ballot topic was cooked-up at Unite HQ behind our backs.

RSO will be used to attack conditions and pay. But how can this be considered more urgent than the cover-up of COVID-19 in our workplaces, the deaths of drivers, the removal of social distancing on buses,

the lack of testing, the absence of proper contact tracing, and the ending of furlough for vulnerable staff?

The union has already delivered RSO at GoAhead, is soon trialling it at Arriva, and has been in discussions with Metroline on its implementation since October last year. We are only being balloted now as part of Unite's cynical attempts to deflect drivers' anger, let off steam, and prevent united action across the capital against the common threat we face.

Unite cannot be trusted to fight for anything.

Eight months ago, more than 97 percent of drivers voted for industrial action across all London garages against driver fatigue caused by dangerous shifts, cuts to break times, punishing timetables and low pay. That strike mandate was betrayed by Unite.

Under the cover of the pandemic, the union shelved our strike vote and signed a secret deal with TfL [Transport for London] and the bus companies pledging "industrial harmony". As infections spread, Unite worked with TfL and the bus operators to conceal illnesses, hospital admissions and deaths, insisting that PPE was "not required".

Labour Mayor of London Sadiq Khan has admitted that **no on-site safety inspections** were conducted by TfL during the pandemic. These weren't necessary, he said, because "any significant concerns can be raised at regular network conference calls or separately between Unite the union and TfL."

The outcome of Unite's collaboration was 33 deaths across London garages—with the union's treachery emboldening the bus companies to treat our lives with contempt. Driver fatigue is worse than ever, with physically exhausting shifts leaving us vulnerable to infection. We are expected to manage passenger load and facemask compliance, with wages cut throughout the pandemic. And we have been instructed by TfL and

the companies that social distancing on school buses “does not apply”—all with Unite’s blessing.

There is now every possibility that the London bus, rail and underground network is acting as a vector, spreading coronavirus throughout the population.

In a letter to drivers last week, Metroline Managing Director Steven Harris had the temerity to call for a NO vote in the strike ballot. Treating us like medieval serfs he threatened drivers that if we strike, there will be less money for “sanitiser” and other “improvements”. What “improvements” is Harris talking about? Metroline should be investigated for corporate manslaughter over deaths caused by their failure to provide PPE and other protection.

Unite’s response to Harris’s letter was pathetic. Regional Officer Mary Summers repeated no fewer than eight times how “disappointed” the union is with Metroline. “We are disappointed that we have to take industrial action which will have an impact on the business and its reputation” she wrote, underscoring Unite’s shared concern for company profits.

Summers’ statement that Unite members “kept services running and prevented disruption” during the pandemic is telling. She is silent on the death toll which resulted. She ends her letter by appealing for “alternative dates for negotiations”.

The London Bus Drivers Rank and File Safety Committee calls for a city-wide strike by all drivers to demand urgent measures to protect our lives and safety:

- No more cover-ups! Immediate disclosure of all infections as soon as the company is informed, with immediate notification to drivers by SMS and company app.

- Immediate on-site testing and contact tracing for all staff at the garage. All staff required to self-isolate must be paid a full wage.

- No victimisations! All staff must be free to speak out on safety concerns and to share information with their colleagues, including on social media, without management and union reprisals.

No faith can be placed in Unite to organise such a fight. They are a pro-company union working to enforce the Johnson government’s deadly reopening of

the economy.

We appeal to our brothers and sisters across London’s bus garages to elect rank-and-file safety committees and begin the fight for these necessary measures.

If London bus garages unite, we have powerful allies among tens of thousands of rail and tube workers, teachers, postal workers and National Health Service staff. We all face a common fight.

To join the London Bus Drivers Rank-and-File Safety Committee click here.

To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>