

Message of support from David O’Sullivan to Berlin Transport Workers Action Committee: “The fight against war and the fight against austerity are one and the same”

Our reporter
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The following message of support has been received by the Transport Workers Action Committee in Berlin from former London bus driver David O’Sullivan. The committee is contesting staff council elections this week for the Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG).

O’Sullivan is a lifelong socialist who worked as a London transport worker for decades. He was dismissed in 2021 after demanding action to save lives at his bus garage during the pandemic. Unite the union submitted evidence that O’Sullivan sought to organise unlawful industrial action.

The London Bus Rank-and-File Committee waged a high-profile campaign for his reinstatement, exposing TfL and the bus operators for their role in the deaths of London bus drivers. Faced with a massive blowout in legal costs, O’Sullivan was forced to settle the case without compensation and sign a non-disclosure agreement. He has submitted the following message of support.

Dear brothers and sisters,

I have followed with enthusiasm the campaign by the Transport Workers Action Committee for council elections taking place this week in Berlin.

Your fight for a rank-and-file insurgency by transport workers in the German capital to oppose the ruthless attacks on pay and conditions by Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe (BVG), state government officials and Verdi union bureaucrats, is winning support.

Your election campaign is linking the fight against austerity to a political struggle against the Gaza genocide and NATO’s proxy war in Ukraine, tapping into the deep anti-war sentiment that exists in the

working class across Europe. Your candidates, led by Andy Niklaus who had been temporarily suspended for speaking out against the Gaza genocide, have courageously defied efforts to suppress opposition to imperialist war, rearmament and complicity in the Israeli government’s crimes by the Bundestag.

The conditions facing Berlin transport workers—longer shifts, ramped-up exploitation and low wages—are all too familiar. In London last week, 200 bus drivers marched to the offices of Transport for London (TfL) demanding action over driver fatigue, lack of rest breaks and toilets, sweltering cabins in summer, and punishing schedules that have contributed to a growing number of road traffic accidents.

Your election campaign is rightly opposing the privatisation of BVG. Privatisation of the public transport network here has proved to be a disaster. In London we are divided across a patchwork of global transport giants including RATP, Arriva and Metroliner. We are pit against each other in a race-to-the-bottom, with TfL funding to bus operators dependent on meeting productivity targets.

Under this regime “inefficient” garages and “under-utilised” routes have been axed. On the railways, private train operators such as Virgin, Abellio and Avanti have looted billions in profit while running the service into the ground. It is more expensive to catch a train from Manchester to London than to fly from Heathrow to Berlin!

Rally organisers from Unite the union supplied placards and banners at last week’s protest. But in 2021-23, when drivers returned massive strike votes

across London to take on the bus companies and TfL, Unite sabotaged a fightback. They divided workers on a company-by-company basis, pushing through below-inflation wage settlements and leaving the conditions facing drivers and the profits of the bus operators untouched.

Even before the Covid pandemic, conditions were getting worse for London bus drivers. In February 2020, we voted 90 percent for London-wide strike action to address worsening driver fatigue. Then the pandemic hit. It was seized on by the union to deepen their collusion with the bus companies and with the London Mayor's office and bury our demands. Our main duty was to "keep London moving" during the pandemic.

We will never forget how bus drivers were treated—our lives were more expendable than the fuel in our vehicles. Drivers' urgent calls for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were opposed. Unite officials issued infamous joint letters co-signed by the bus companies and TfL, instructing us that face masks were "not necessary". Their ruthless prioritisation of profit over lives led to the deaths of more than 69 London bus drivers in 2020-22.

Drivers who took wildcat action to oppose unsafe conditions at the bus garages and inside their vehicles were threatened with disciplinary action. Others were victimised and sacked with the complicity of Unite, which supplied "evidence" against them for trying to save lives. The bus companies and the Mayor's office later denied any responsibility for our colleagues' deaths, leaving their families penniless.

In 2021-22, as inflation surged amid the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades, bus drivers, earlier praised as "frontline heroes", demanded action to reverse decades of wage suppression. Unite leader Sharon Graham claimed Unite would lead a "London-wide fight" for an "inflation-busting pay-rise". But Unite staggered pay disputes so that workers at each company were left to fight alone. Unite officials and reps organised repeated ballots on paltry pay offers in order to wear down resistance and push through an eventual "yes" vote after drivers concluded there was no alternative.

The outcome could have been very different. The London bus drivers' fight unfolded amid a growing wave of strike ballots across the London Underground, national rail, on the docks, post and logistics sector, and

among school teachers, university lecturers and National Health Service workers numbering in the millions. These "essential workers" demanded an end to poverty and austerity.

With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the British government demanded the suppression of all strikes to support NATO's proxy war against Russia. Striking London Underground workers were denounced by politicians as "Putin's stooges" and "the enemy underground".

The hated government of Boris Johnson relied on the services of the trade union bureaucracy to extinguish the emerging strike wave, with the RMT and ASLEF bowing down and cancelling strikes—a role they are deepening under the Labour government.

The fight against war and the fight against austerity are one and the same. Both mean fighting for the unity of the working class across company, industry and national borders to oppose the subordination of our social rights to the dictates of corporate profit and NATO's insane and reckless war plans for World War III. That is why your fight in these elections is so important, not just for transport workers in Berlin, but for the working class in the UK, across Europe and internationally.

Fraternally,
David O'Sullivan



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