

London's Air Quality Is a Problem, But Sadiq Khan's Congestion Charge Isn't the Solution

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If we've learned anything from recent history, it's that even the most worthwhile issues and transformative politics can become co-opted by neoliberal politicians. The imminent spectre of climate disaster demands the most urgent response at all levels of government, but while the current political system remains in place, environmental policies will continue to be little more than a PR smokescreen for business as usual. They often pit people against planet, but the future of our planet and working class interests shouldn't be at odds. Why should they, when just 100 companies are responsible for more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions?

Still, right-wing and centrist politicians continue to adopt policies that penalise the working class under the guise of environmentalism. Over the past few months, the *gilets jaunes* in France has waged battle against president Emmanuel Macron's government, resisting his administration's punishing neoliberalisation of their economy. The spark was struck when Macron brought in a new fuel tax, nominally a pro-climate policy to reduce carbon emissions. The tax would have disproportionately impacted working class people on the brink of poverty – those who have been pushed out to the suburbs due to rising house prices or those already there, dependent on driving to work due to a lack of public transport infrastructure. It's not hard to see how this policy, dictated from the gilded presidential palace without attention to the difficulties of ordinary people's lives, did not cut much ice with the French public. This is quickly becoming a textbook case for the limits of neoliberal environmentalism.

A similar policy is knocking on our front door. From April this year, London Mayor Sadiq Khan plans to impose a new congestion charge of £11.50 per day on minicab drivers, which will cost drivers up to £4k each year – roughly 25% of their take home pay after other costs. There are nearly 110,000 minicab drivers in London working for operators like Uber, Addison Lee and smaller firms. They make up a central plank of both the city's public transport infrastructure and population. And, much like in France, these are workers often on the brink of poverty.

Ali Mohammad is a driver we met two weeks ago, parked on a Soho side street at 1am waiting around for a higher surge rate to kick in on the Uber app before accepting any rides. Mohammad used to work as an investment manager, but lost his job during company resizing. He often works up to 80 hours a week to get by, hunting for rides above 1.5x on surge charge to make enough money to pay for the car deal he was encouraged to buy into and to sustain his family. Many drivers are former white collar workers like Mohammad, who took up driving due to little job growth after the recession. Others have been driving for decades. They keep afloat by working punishing hours and learning tricks to ensure they get a decent fare rate on an app where many drivers earn less than the minimum wage for each hour they work.

Drivers working for Uber, Addison Lee and other private hire operators are some of the poorest and

most exploited workers in the city – 71% of drivers are from designated deprived communities and 94% of drivers are BAME. Transport for London's (TfL) own [impact analysis](#) on the congestion charge extension noted the disproportionate impact on the city's most vulnerable communities. The mayor's policy will drive precarious workers into poverty, and yet the same impact analysis estimates the charge will reduce congestion by only 1% (or 600 vehicles) per day. What this congestion charge will certainly do, though, is collect huge amounts of additional revenue for TfL – an estimated £300m from the pockets of the poorest.

With air quality in London so poisonous it's [killing people](#), we desperately need policies that reduce congestion and pollution. Minicab drivers know this only too well. But a just green transition needs to underwrite all actions we take. A few months ago, private hire drivers were being [touted as an integral part](#) of a transition economy, allowing us to phase out private cars entirely. This week they are being thrown under the bus.

Drivers have been [calling on the mayor](#) to adopt more sensible solutions: a cap on licenses for private hire vehicles; enforcement of a minimum wage for drivers as a floor below fare rates so operator firms are stimulated to reduce capacity; a congestion charge on operators so the charge can be effectively passed on to the consumer to stimulate demand reduction; and 4,000 rest areas as essential infrastructure to reduce needless idling and cruising of app drivers in congestion zones.

But why aren't common sense proposals such as these being implemented? Ironically, under Boris Johnson's and then Khan's mayorships, the number of private hire vehicles has swelled, with private hire becoming a key part of the city's transport infrastructure, creating the problem they now seek to solve. The mayor has long been too cosy with companies like Uber and will not challenge their interests. And Uber has lobbied hard against any cap on private hire numbers as they want as large a fleet of drivers as possible so they can keep fares low. Uber and other operators are happy to pass on costs to their low paid workers.

For politicians like Khan and Johnson, the environment is a useful buzzword. But they use it to clean up the image of administrations who would never dare stand up big companies that get in the way of real climate solutions.

Solutions to the climate crisis can't come at the expense of social and economic justice. We need to stand with workers fighting neoliberal policies – whether framed as environmental or not – as only together will we have the strength to take on corporate power. We need to push for a transformational agenda to improve not just our environment but our infrastructure and communities too, while targeting those most responsible for environmental degradation – not those most vulnerable in our society.

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