



Terence Layne used the phrase “pandemic trauma.” He knew that he was suffering from it, too. In April, he said, “I’m saturated with grief and anger.” Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS AUGUST 31, 2020 ISSUE

A TRANSIT WORKER'S SURVIVAL STORY

Driving a New York City bus during a pandemic and an uprising.

By Jennifer Gonnerman

August 24, 2020



0:00 / 39:31

Audio: Listen to this article. To hear more, download Audm for iPhone or Android.

n the morning of March 23rd, Terence A. Layne drove a half-empty M116 bus across Manhattan, starting on the Upper West Side. He went around parked cars and stopped at red lights, all the while contemplating COVID-19—the “microbial enemy,” as he called it, that was sweeping through New York City. Most of Manhattan’s workers were staying home, and many of its wealthier residents had fled the city, but Layne and his fellow transit workers were still showing up to their jobs each day, in order to keep the city’s buses and subways running. Layne knew that his colleagues were terrified of contracting COVID-19, and as he drove along 116th Street he tried to imagine what he might say to them to lift their morale.

Layne, who is fifty-five, wore the bus operator’s winter uniform—navy tie, sky-blue dress shirt—and a knit hat with a patch for his depot, Manhattanville, in West Harlem. After his last passengers exited, he propped his phone in the bus’s front window and began recording a video message to his colleagues. “Brothers and sisters,” he said, standing in the aisle of the bus, “I want to thank you all for stepping up and coming to work today and showing what leadership looks like. We are performing an essential and invaluable task.” He reminded his co-workers that they were not only delivering hospital personnel to their jobs. “What about the person that needs dialysis? What about the person who needs regular cancer treatments?” he said. “We are helping all of these people live and survive this global pandemic.”

He went on, “Ordinarily we’re not appreciated. We’re not valued. Let’s face it: the squeegee man of the crack era is held in greater regard and higher esteem than a New York City transit bus operator. . . . We just have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that sometimes the only recognition you’re going to receive is from the woman or man reflected back to you in the mirror as you are preparing for work.” He added, “If no one else thanks you, if no one else recognizes you, know that I do.” He uploaded the video to three Facebook groups for transit workers and continued on his route.

Layne has been navigating a bus through the streets of New York City for twenty-one years, and he knew how thankless the job could be. Every veteran bus operator has stories about customers who screamed at them, or cursed them out, or spat on them. As a rookie, Layne was attacked by an irate motorist wielding the steering-wheel lock known as the Club. Throughout March, the sound of passengers coughing added stress to the job. Then, on March 26th, Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union, which represents the city’s subway and bus workers, announced its first two deaths from COVID-19: Peter Petrassi, a forty-nine-year-old subway conductor, and Oliver Cyrus, a sixty-one-year-old bus operator. Layne knew Cyrus; they both worked out of the Manhattanville Bus Depot. At the depot, Cyrus was known as a quiet man who could often be found reading a book in the locker room.

Layne was at the depot when he heard the news. “I was shocked,” he recalled. “At this point, now it had come home.” During the next ten weeks, the pandemic would act like a slow-moving Triangle Shirtwaist fire, rippling through the ranks of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and killing more than a hundred of its employees. This spring, the M.T.A., which runs the city’s buses and subways, endured a significantly higher death toll from COVID-19 than other government agencies in New York City, including the police and fire departments.

Transit workers kept the subways and buses moving while New York City was on lockdown, and, as the city began to reopen, they were once again on the front lines. In the midst of all of this stood Terence Layne, a native New Yorker whose life had imbued him with a deep understanding of the challenges confronting his city. “People think of front-line workers—the grocery workers, transit workers, the first responders, cops, firefighters—as having helped the city get through it. But that’s not what happened,” he said. “We helped the city *survive* it.”

or the past century, a bus depot has stood in Manhattanville, on the far west side of Harlem. There is no marker, however, to indicate that a crucial moment in the city's history took place there. In the nineteen-thirties, two private bus companies had their offices at the 132nd Street Depot, as it was called then, and they refused to hire Blacks as bus drivers or mechanics. In March of 1941, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and other community leaders held a rally with more than a thousand people at the Abyssinian Baptist Church to call for a bus boycott. Supporters picketed bus stops in Harlem, urging people to stay off the buses. "Don't Ride Here! Ride Where Negroes Can Work," one placard declared. Another urged, "Walk so that Negro men may live."

The Transport Workers Union came out in support of the boycott. (The union's bus workers had recently gone on strike, and Harlem leaders had supported them.) On April 12th, the *New York Age*, a Black newspaper, reported that the boycott was working: the bus companies "are suffering a tremendous financial loss due to the drop of patrons." A month after the boycott began, its leaders, the union, and the bus companies signed an agreement at the 132nd Street Depot. The two companies committed to hiring a hundred Black drivers and seventy Black mechanics, and promised to insure that Blacks held seventeen per cent of jobs, roughly reflecting their share of Manhattan's population. The leaders of the boycott declared, "This is not the end but merely the beginning in the historic struggle of the Negro people of the 20th century to assert their rights."

Today, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority operates the city's bus lines, and Blacks make up nearly half of the forty thousand M.T.A. workers in Local 100. Five years ago, Layne took a course at the City University of New York on the history of the transit system, and he makes a point of informing other bus operators about what he learned. "Before the early forties, Black people could not even operate buses. We were restricted to either being caretakers or janitors or porters," Layne told me. "The union, the T.W.U., was a fundamental part in kicking that door in and making it possible for people like myself and my forebears to find employment in higher titles." Layne is now Local 100's chief shop steward at the Manhattanville depot. "I just believed it was my duty to preserve this for generations to come," he said.

The M.T.A. runs twenty-eight bus depots, each of which has a distinct personality. Manhattanville, where some five hundred and fifty bus operators work, is known for its collegial spirit. "There's a lot of camaraderie, and we in Manhattanville have a reputation for standing up to management when necessary," Layne said. The depot has four levels: mechanics work on the first floor; the second and third floors hold the parked buses; and the top floor is known as "the penthouse." Managers have offices there, and the bus operators have their "swing room," where they hang out when they're on break. The swing room can be a noisy, rollicking place, where workers eat together and play pool.

Layne cleans his glasses as he prepares to leave home for work. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

“We spend time either commiserating or swapping stories about what we’ve dealt with,” Layne told me. Some of the stories are about misbehaving passengers. A customer can curse out an operator, get off the bus, and suffer no consequences. Layne likens the operator’s predicament to that of the waitstaff in a restaurant. “There are certain positions that our society has identified as those kinds of people that we can abuse and mistreat simply because we are having a bad day or maybe because we are dissatisfied with the service,” he said. “And the bus operator falls into that category.”

Driving a bus in New York City is also physically more taxing than passengers might imagine. In the driver’s seat all day, bouncing over potholes and uneven pavement, bus operators are prone to an ailment known as “whole-body vibration.” (“If you think of a box of crackers—if you shake it up really hard, those crackers are going to begin to disintegrate,” Layne said. “That pretty much is what happens to our skeletal system over time.”) Older operators often develop problems with their back and their legs. Some limp as they walk through the depot. Layne said, “You can just tell the way they’re moving, which is slowly, that they’re in pain.”

Despite the challenges of being an M.T.A. bus operator, Layne, who has three children, says that he has “one of the best jobs in New York.” He explains: “There are few jobs where you can make a very decent living, get really good health coverage, and earn a pension after twenty-five years of service that don’t require a college degree.” Starting pay for a New York City bus operator is \$24.87 an hour. After five years on the job, the pay rises to \$35.53 an hour, or seventy-four thousand dollars a year for a forty-hour week. With overtime, some bus operators make more than a hundred thousand dollars a year.

Since becoming a shop steward, in 2014, Layne has spent his off hours on union tasks. At lunchtime, he says, he cannot walk through the swing room without a co-worker’s pulling him aside to discuss a grievance or ask a question. If a bus operator gets into a serious accident, Layne might have to report to the scene. He receives no additional pay for his union work, but he has no regrets. “I think I have found my calling,” he said.

Terence Layne grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, but his family has roots in Harlem. His father, Alexander Layne, a jazz musician, was born at Harlem Hospital in 1939. A few years ago, Alex gave Terence a walking tour of his childhood haunts.

Alex pointed out the block, on West 127th Street, where his own father, an immigrant from St. Vincent, had operated a grocery store. They stopped by the apartment building where he grew up, on St. Nicholas Avenue. Alex also took Terence by the imposing Gothic structure on West 135th Street that housed the public school he attended, the High School of Music & Art. He began playing the double bass in high school, and by the time he was twenty, in 1959, he had joined the house band at Count Basie's night club.

In 1963, Alex and his wife, Senora, moved to Brooklyn, and in the fall of 1964 Terence was born. At the time, Alex's career was taking off; in 1964, he performed in Africa and Europe with Miriam Makeba. But five years later he joined the Nation of Islam and stopped touring. He became Alex 6X, and his son became Terence 3X. As a young child, Terence sometimes tagged along when his father, dressed in a suit and bow tie, peddled the Nation of Islam's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, on street corners. By 1970, Alex and Senora had two more children. To support the family, she worked as a manager at a hospital in Brooklyn, while he did odd jobs and played gigs.

Layne walks through Hamilton Heights. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

When Terence was five, he began attending the Muhammad University of Islam, a school at Mosque No. 7, on West 116th Street, in Harlem. The curriculum, which included lessons in Arabic, was more demanding than that of most public schools, and in the afternoons the male students had martial-arts classes and practiced marching in formation. "We were being groomed to be warriors and soldiers—it was, in effect, a military school," Terence recalled. "There was an adversarial relationship that we were taught and bred into from the very beginning." In that relationship, there was no doubt who the enemy was: "The theology is that the Black man is the Supreme Being, and the white man is the Devil."

Relations between the city's Black residents and its police force were especially tense at the time, and on April 14, 1972, an infamous chapter in New York City's history unfolded inside Mosque No. 7. That morning, the New York City Police Department received a phone call from someone who claimed to be a detective, reporting that there was an officer inside the mosque who was in need of help. The call turned out to be a hoax—there was no officer in distress—but, before that had been

determined, four officers entered the mosque. They got into a scuffle with a large group of Nation of Islam members; the officers were beaten, and one of them, Phillip Cardillo, was shot. He died six days later.

Terence, who was seven, recalls school ending abruptly that day. "We were lined up in military formation outside the school for what seemed like a long time," he said. He remembers "a lot of people standing around and looking, a lot of police vehicles, what seemed to be bedlam." A school bus took him home, but the scene outside the mosque grew increasingly chaotic. Teen-agers flung bricks from the roof of an apartment building; the crowd on the street flipped over a car. The next day, the *Daily News* ran the headline "LENOX AVE. BECOMES A BATTLEGROUND."

A year later, another incident involving the N.Y.P.D. left a deep impression on Terence. "I remember learning about a young Black boy, ten years old, killed while he was with his stepfather," he said. The child's name was Clifford Glover. On April 28, 1973, Glover and his stepfather were walking in South Jamaica, Queens, when a plainclothes patrolman named Thomas Shea approached them. The two thought they were being robbed and ran. Shea shot the boy in the back. He went on trial for murder, but a jury acquitted him.

Terence's mother left the Nation of Islam in 1972, and his father left about a year later. The family moved to Queens, and Terence entered the city's public-school system. For high school, he won admission to Brooklyn Tech, one of the city's specialized high schools, but by sophomore year he had stopped attending classes. Looking back on those years, he says, "The path to delinquency is never dramatic. It always starts with: 'Oh, we're not going to go to class. Oh, we're going to get a tre bag and smoke some weed. You know what, I think I'm going to put this bag of chips under my shirt instead of paying for it.' . . . You just keep going down that road until, inevitably, someday robbing somebody or climbing through a window or stealing a car sounds like a good idea. Because you've kind of already abandoned education, and now you need something to do with your time, and if you have spare time you need money."

Between 1982 and 1984, Layne was sent to state prison twice, for robbery and attempted burglary. He was incarcerated for nearly five years, with stops at Elmira and Auburn prisons. "I broke my parents' heart with that," he said. "They couldn't understand what happened to me. I couldn't understand much of it, either." When he first went to prison, his mother visited him. "But he came home and he messed up again," Senora recalled. "At that point, that was it. It was: 'You know what? You had an opportunity to change—you didn't.'" She stopped visiting and wrote infrequently.

His father stayed in closer contact, sending letters and travelling to see him. "He never gave up. I guess he just felt like he could still connect with me and try to get me to understand the harm that I was doing to myself and others," Terence said. He remembers his father writing to him, "You made a pretty good mess of your life so far, but once you get out—if you straighten up and fly right, if you stop now—you'll always be able to say, 'Hey, look, I did this as a teen-ager.'" One line in particular stayed with him: "You can shoot out of there like a rocket and never look back."

In the eighties, the New York state-prison system had a robust education program, and Terence took advantage of it, earning his G.E.D. and taking college courses. He also began questioning what he had been taught as a child about white people. "I began to come across white people that had been kind to me—counsellors in prison, teachers that really wanted to help me learn—and how do you reconcile this human being, who I've been taught is the Devil, with the fact that they are actually treating me with kindness and compassion?" he said. "That doesn't look like a devil to me."

By the time Terence left prison, in 1986, his parents had separated. He moved in with his father, in Queens. Harlem's jazz scene had diminished significantly, and Alex Layne was driving a yellow cab. Terence, who had been a barber in prison, found a job at a barbershop on West 125th Street, in Harlem, and continued working there for the next fourteen years. In 1995, he married a woman with two children. By then, he had a child of his own, and together they had another child.

One day in the late nineties, Layne was at the barbershop, seated in his barber chair, when he opened the *Daily News* and saw an announcement that the M.T.A. was hiring bus operators. Business at the shop had slowed, and the job looked appealing. It promised a steady income and health insurance—neither of which he had. He sent in an application and, in June of 1999, he started his career as a bus operator, at the Gun Hill depot, in the Bronx. He worked at three other depots before arriving at Manhattanville, in 2010.

One day, a supervisor at Manhattanville told him something that he never forgot: “The police officer sees people when they're bad, and the firefighter sees people when they need help, but the bus operator sees people as they really are.” Layne said, “He's right. I get to see New Yorkers as they really are.” He had always enjoyed writing, and some days he wrote about moments he had witnessed while on the job: a young father struggling with a stroller who slipped onto the bus without paying, a customer he hadn't seen in a decade whose “five o'clock shadow” had turned “completely white.” Sometimes he shared his writings with his mother, whom he now calls his “best friend.” She said, “I think driving the bus actually gave him a much more empathetic sense of people.”

One day in 2014, during a layover on his route, Layne wrote a poem that he titled “Like Me.” It began, “When I arrived at the last stop, / I saw a man soundly sleeping in the rear of the bus / He seemed to have come from no where good, heading to no place better, / He had dark skin, and coarse hair . . . Like me.” The poem continues, “I patiently and gently tried to wake him, . . . After a minute or two, he rose to his feet / Disoriented, Unbalanced, lumbering forward in search of a door, to pass through. / And as I climbed back into my seat, / through the tears in my eyes, / I watched him amble down the street / into the uncertain void that we call, ‘The Future’ . . . / Like me.”

A woman waits for a bus on Fort Washington Avenue, in Manhattan. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

In early March, as COVID-19 began to seize the local media's attention, the M.T.A. prohibited its employees from wearing masks. A memo issued to transit workers explained that, because "masks are not medically necessary" and are "not part of the authorized uniform," they "should not be worn by employees during work hours." At the time, the C.D.C. did not recommend that healthy people wear them. The union's leaders fought the mask ban, facing off against M.T.A. executives at a meeting on March 5th. Tony Utano, the president of Local 100, said, "They kept throwing the C.D.C. in there, and I kept saying, 'The experts have been wrong. I don't see any harm in us wearing a mask for extra protection.'" He brought up the fact that, after 9/11,

officials assured the public that the air in lower Manhattan was safe to breathe, which turned out to be untrue. “When the towers went down, three thousand transit workers showed up,” he said, “and now we have transit workers who are passing away today.”

Patrick Warren, chief safety officer for the M.T.A., said that the agency initially banned wearing masks “because health officials were saying it was a risky thing to do.” He added, “They said it would be detrimental or more risky to wear a mask because it causes you to touch your face more.” Speaking of the union, he said, “They’re not health officials, either, and they didn’t know . . . whether or not it was a healthy thing to do, in my opinion. But what they did feel was that the workforce would feel better by wearing masks, that it was a feel-good, confidence thing.”

By March 8th, the M.T.A. had put out another memo, stating that employees could wear masks “if this makes them more comfortable during this time.” But masks were difficult to obtain, and the M.T.A. didn’t provide them. “They refused to give us masks,” Felix Hidalgo, a bus operator from the Manhattanville depot, said. “Everybody was mad—and bringing stuff from their own homes to clean the buses they were driving.” Layne got a few surgical masks from a friend. Stores were sold out of disinfectant wipes, but he discovered a box under his kitchen sink. Though the M.T.A. said that it was cleaning its buses more frequently, he began bringing several wipes to work each day and using them to disinfect the steering wheel of his bus and any knob or button he might touch.

At the start of March, Layne’s bus had been noisy in the mornings with the sounds of children on their way to school. But after Mayor Bill de Blasio shut down schools, on March 16th, and Governor Andrew Cuomo closed nonessential businesses, the following week, the schoolchildren and most of the commuters vanished. To protect bus operators from contracting COVID-19, the M.T.A. began cordoning off the first several seats of each bus with a yellow chain. Passengers were required to board through the back door, and since the fare box is at the front they were allowed to ride free of charge.

On March 27th, Layne wrote on his Facebook page, “This morning, as I waited at a red light at the corner of 125th St. and Malcolm X Boulevard, a young Hispanic woman approached her car and glanced at me. . . . She then reached into her car and grabbed this packet of sanitizing wipes and walked over to my driver-side window and handed them to me. . . . I thanked her for her compassion and kindness; she smiled and advised me to be careful out here. . . . People like her are the reason we are going to prevail.”

That day, the M.T.A. announced that it would supply masks to its employees (eschewing the C.D.C.’s advice). By then, thirteen hundred M.T.A. workers had been quarantined because they had the virus, or had been exposed to someone who had it, or were showing COVID-like symptoms. On March 31st, Governor Cuomo announced that forty-three thousand people in New York City had tested positive for COVID-19. The following day, Mayor de Blasio revealed that more than thirteen hundred had died. Both men warned that the worst was yet to come.

Layne inspects the plastic barrier on his bus. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

In March, COVID-19 had struck Layne's family, too. His father was eighty but still worked as a jazz musician, performing in restaurants and clubs. Layne called him "an unsung legend in the jazz world." But in the second week of March he began showing symptoms of the virus. "When I first found out, he seemed to be O.K.," Layne said. "But a few days later we were told he was getting weaker and not doing as well." In late March, Alex Layne was admitted to Harlem Hospital. "The gravity of this pandemic really set in," Layne said. "He doesn't even deal with the public like I do, and he had it."

On April 6th, Governor Cuomo tweeted, "Thank you to NY's transit workers who are showing up every day. Because of them, doctors, nurses, first responders, grocers, pharmacists & all essential workers can get where they need to go." Meanwhile, during the previous eleven days thirty-three transit workers had died. James Gannon, the son of a bus operator, is the director of communications for Local 100. In the past, whenever a Local 100 member died Gannon would write up a few paragraphs about his or her life for the union's Web site. This spring, he spent a sizable portion of each day as an obituary writer and enlisted the help of two co-workers. "They just came so fast I couldn't keep up with them," he said.

Bus operators endured some of the greatest losses. Local 100 published obituaries for Miguel Chumpitaz, sixty, who had been "one of the most beloved members" of the Jackie Gleason Bus Depot, in Sunset Park; Emmanuel Jacob, also sixty, whose colleagues called him Jake the Snake because of the pool skills he displayed in the swing room at the East New York depot; and Ramon Gutierrez, sixty-two, who drove the BX18 bus through the Bronx and was so popular with passengers that some of them, when they learned of his death, began to sob.

Whenever Layne had a layover, he would look at his phone, visiting Facebook groups for bus operators. Often, he discovered news of another death. The words scrolled across his screen like a ticker tape of grief and mourning. "Every morning that I go to work, I wonder if today is the day," he wrote on Facebook. "I'm not surrendering to fear and morbidity, but the danger is real . . . wondering how many of us, and who, is going to make it to the other side of this tribulation."

In April, Layne began driving the M96, the crosstown bus that traverses Ninety-sixth Street. It's usually a popular line, but his bus was virtually empty. Across the city, bus ridership was down more than eighty per cent. Many of Layne's passengers were essential workers who got off at one of the two hospitals on his route, Mount Sinai or Metropolitan. By April 6th, nearly six thousand M.T.A. employees had been quarantined. As a shop steward, Layne was assigned the task of, as he put it, "looking after the sick and shut-in." Each afternoon, he would get the "sick log" from the crew dispatcher and sit in the depot's union office, calling and texting his colleagues who had the virus.

One of them was Felix Hidalgo, who had six-year-old twin daughters and a form of blood cancer that requires him to take chemotherapy pills. Layne would ask Hidalgo how he was feeling. "It started off with chills; I felt like I was in the meat locker," Hidalgo told me. "I had three blankets on, and it felt like I had nothing. And then it went from the chills to the body aches. I felt like—you know the cartoon character that they pick up from the legs and slam him from building to building, or tree to tree? That's exactly how I felt."

Layne cleans his bus before an afternoon shift. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker

Layne found some bus operators sequestered in their bedrooms, trying not to infect their families; others were living alone. "You could hear it over the phone. Not only were they sick but they were in terror," he said. Some "were afraid to seek medical attention simply because they didn't want to go to a place where they felt there was a greater chance of them becoming sicker." He had to coax a few to visit an urgent-care center. One day after making calls, Layne said, "I'll never be the same. I don't know if I can get that dry, raspy cough out of my head."

By now, Layne could relate to the families of transit workers who had died, because he was struggling with an intense grief of his own. After his father was admitted to Harlem Hospital, Layne said, "we received one text from him, and that was it." On March 30th, a nurse was "kind enough to put his phone on speaker by his ear . . . so me, my siblings, and his wife could speak to him." Alex Layne died the next day. "We couldn't see him; we couldn't be there to comfort him. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that we could do," he said. "That was the worst part of it all."

The family held a funeral in Brooklyn, and Alex was buried in the Evergreens Cemetery. In the weeks after his death, as Terence drove his bus across Manhattan, memories of his father crept into his mind. “I’ll see something that reminds me of a conversation we had or something that he did,” he told me. “I might see another musician with their instrument or maybe pass by a club or block where he performed.” It was difficult to accept that he would never see his father again. “Nobody lives forever, but I certainly didn’t expect to lose him this soon,” he said. “The way he moved around and took care of himself, and by his physical condition, we easily could have seen him being around for another ten years.” He added, “It still doesn’t seem real.”

By May 11th, COVID-19 had killed an estimated twenty thousand New Yorkers—more than seven times the number of people who died in the city on 9/11. The virus’s death toll included a hundred and seventeen M.T.A. employees. Nobody knew exactly why so many had died, but there were many possible explanations, ranging from age (more than a quarter of the city’s transit workers were fifty-five or older) to race and ethnicity (Blacks and Latinos, who make up two-thirds of Local 100’s M.T.A. employees, were dying at a higher rate than other New Yorkers) and the challenges of social-distancing on the job.

Inside the Manhattanville Bus Depot, life had changed. Some employees stopped eating in the swing room, and instead ate alone in their cars. Of the bus operators who had been ill, some never returned to work. Those who did come back appeared gaunt, exhausted. Among his colleagues, Layne sensed that grief was rampant; many had lost friends or relatives. “So many of us have lost our parents, I don’t even want to try to count,” Layne said. “It’s almost like a whole generation has been decimated.” He used the phrase “pandemic trauma.” He knew that he was suffering from it, too. One day, he wrote on Facebook, “I’m saturated with grief and anger.”

As the death toll mounted, the fury of Local 100 members over the loss of their co-workers grew louder. Tramell Thompson, a subway conductor who leads a dissident group within the union, has his own YouTube channel, where he attacked Governor Cuomo, who appoints the M.T.A.’s chairman, for not acting more quickly to protect the city’s transit workers. He also attacked Local 100’s leaders, accusing them of not doing enough for their members. Some employees believed that the city’s transit system should have been shut down entirely in order to minimize the virus’s spread and protect employees.

Layne didn’t agree with that idea, but, he said, “I can’t help but wonder whether or not some of this loss of life was preventable.” The matter of when transit workers were given P.P.E. “has garnered a fair measure of resentment towards senior management,” he said. “Hindsight is 20/20 vision, so you can’t say with certainty what may or may not have happened. But one thing is for sure—had the P.P.E. been issued earlier, certainly we wouldn’t be able to complain about the fact that it wasn’t. We feel that we were at risk longer than we should have been.”

In May, the M.T.A. took an additional step to protect bus operators by installing a vinyl curtain alongside the chain blocking off the front of the bus. Some bus operators weren’t convinced that it would be effective. “It’s just a sheet of clear plastic that doesn’t even extend from the floor to the ceiling,” Layne said. “That certainly is not going to stop an airborne virus from travelling around the cabin.” As the weather grew warmer, the city’s buses became more crowded and tensions were evident. Masks were required, and when passengers boarded a bus without one, other riders sometimes yelled at them. One day in late May, Layne’s bus was standing-room only, with passengers squeezed together in the aisle. “You can’t practice social distancing if you have thirty-five to forty people crammed into the back of a forty-foot bus,” he told me. “We’re sitting on a simmering pot here.”

Layne could feel his stress level rising, and not only because of the conditions on his bus. The news was also a factor. First, there was the video of a white woman calling the police on a Black man in Central Park after he asked her to put her dog on a leash.

Then, on May 25th, there was the footage of a police officer in Minneapolis killing George Floyd by pressing his knee against Floyd's neck. "I'm accustomed to dealing with what comes with being a Black man in this country. But I'm just livid," Layne said the next day. "The only thing that's not susceptible or vulnerable to even a global pandemic: racism."

As a bus operator, Layne had been on the receiving end of racial slurs from passengers, motorists, and cyclists. He estimated that such incidents occurred "five or ten times a year easily." After he got off work on May 29th, he went to a march protesting police brutality and racism in lower Manhattan. During the past three decades, he had attended many rallies held to draw attention to the killings of Black men, from the white mob attack on Michael Griffin, in 1986, to the N.Y.P.D.'s shooting of Amadou Diallo, in 1999. But this time Layne was taken aback by the scene; he estimated that half the crowd was white. "I've never seen anything like this," he said. "I knew that there were young white people that were getting involved, but I had no idea that the numbers were as large as it is—and that made me feel good."

That evening, thousands of people gathered outside the Barclays Center, in Brooklyn. The N.Y.P.D. detained some of them and loaded them onto an M.T.A. bus, presumably to take them to Central Booking, but the bus operator stepped off, refusing to transport them—and became an instant hero on Twitter, where a video of the scene went viral. "Kudos to him," Layne said. "Local 100 has been a part of the civil-rights movement since the nineteen-forties. We're not going to be commandeered and forced into a law-enforcement role."

Later that night, Local 100 sent a reminder of the union's policy. "T.W.U. Local 100 Bus Operators do not work for the NYPD," the union said on Twitter. "All T.W.U. Operators should refuse to transport arrested protestors." The union went on to put out another statement, saying that Floyd's death brought back memories of a police killing in New York: "The death of Eric Garner, caused by a police chokehold in July 2014, hit home in the hardest of fashions for our union. His sister was, and is, a Bus Operator in Brooklyn; his mother a retired Train Operator and his aunt, a Station Agent." Gwen Carr, Garner's mother, had been at her job driving the N train when her son was killed.

On June 4th, Layne attended a memorial rally for Floyd at Cadman Plaza, in Brooklyn. Some of his co-workers who could not attend staged their own protest inside the Manhattanville depot, then posted a photograph of it on Facebook: fourteen men and two women, most wearing masks, many in bus-operator uniforms, taking a knee together in the swing room. Several days later, Layne was at another protest, this time near Gracie Mansion. He knew that his father would have been proud of him; his parents had raised him to speak out against injustice.

Whenever Layne attended a rally, he was careful to protect himself from COVID-19. At one protest, he wore a surgical mask, then tied over it a navy kerchief emblazoned with Local 100's logo. Standing on the perimeter of the event, he pulled down his face coverings, took out his phone, and pressed Record: "As the heir apparent to the benefits of the civil-rights movement that my parents, my grandparents, and all my forebears fought in—the struggle, the sacrifice, the martyrdom that allowed someone like me to be able to be in the position in life that I am today—I have an absolute responsibility to make sure that I carry that baton and pass it forth to my children."

At the end of June, Layne started a new bus route: the M98. It begins in northern Manhattan, in Washington Heights, and ends on the Upper East Side, at East Sixty-seventh Street and Lexington Avenue. "I'm picking up strivers, commuters," Layne told me. "The jobs may range from office worker to a domestic, somebody who works on the Upper East Side as a nanny or

maid.” The worst of the pandemic seemed to have passed, and the city was reopening. According to the M.T.A., the agency’s last death from COVID-19 occurred on June 2nd; its death toll stands at a hundred and thirty-one.

This spring, as many New Yorkers lost their jobs, Layne sometimes reminded his co-workers, “At the end of the day, we are still working, we are still gainfully employed—and we can’t lose sight of that.” But the pandemic plunged the M.T.A. into a financial crisis. The agency had serious budget problems before COVID-19 arrived, and the drastic falloff in ridership, combined with the increased cost of cleaning the buses and the subways, has been financially devastating. The possibility of service cuts and layoffs is looming.

The M.T.A. has announced that it will start charging for bus service again on August 31st, and passengers will board through the front to pay the fare. The agency has been installing barricades—either a vinyl curtain or a hard plastic shield—next to the operators’ compartments. Some operators were alarmed, however, when they realized that they will have to keep the barricade open while they drive, so that they can see the right-hand mirror.

At the same time, assaults on bus operators have been on the rise. In May, an operator told Layne that a passenger had hurled a can of soup at him. More recently, another operator reported that she had been spit on by a passerby. “Someone just came over to the window, which she had open, and spit in her face,” Layne said. Some riders still board without a mask, making the job even more stressful. On July 20th, a passenger attacked a sixty-two-year-old bus operator after the operator asked him to put on a mask.

News of such assaults spread fast inside the Manhattanville depot. “I don’t even have the words to describe how low morale is,” Layne told me in July. “Nobody is happy to be here. Happy to have a job, yes. But nobody comes bopping into the depot on a regular basis brimming with joy. That’s just not the kind of work we do. We are not treated well.” Layne went on vacation in late July, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the job. “We were being lionized as heroic three months ago,” he said. But now “we’re back to business as usual.” He added, “You don’t turn around and mistreat the people who helped you get through it—that’s where I become livid.”

This year, for the first time, Layne dreaded going back to work after vacation. But on August 10th he returned to the depot. He pulled his bus out on time, at 6:36 A.M., and headed north toward the first stop on his route. “I don’t want to be cynical, but I don’t know if anybody is going to remember that during this period it was the bus operators who helped this city survive,” he said. “People have a short memory.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of New York City’s public-transportation agency.

MORE ON THE CORONAVIRUS

- To protect American lives and revive the economy, Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate school-reopening plans. It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on what children need during the crisis.

- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reelection campaign exploit the pandemic to maximize profits.
- Meet the high-finance mogul in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to live and work in now?

Published in the print edition of the August 31, 2020, issue, with the headline “Survival Story.”



Jennifer Gonnerman joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2015. She is the author of “Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett.”

More: [Coronavirus](#) [New York City](#) [African-Americans](#) [Metropolitan Transit Authority \(M.T.A.\)](#) [Buses](#) [Bus Drivers](#) [Grief](#) [Pandemics](#)

[Viruses](#) [The Coronavirus's Economic Impact](#)
