UK "gig economy" worker's death tied to no sick pay, no sick leave

Margot Miller
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The tragic death of 53-year-old courier, Don Lane, underlines the terrible conditions workers face in the so-called "gig economy."

Lane, from Christchurch on the south coast of England, had worked for parcel giant Dynamic Parcel Distribution (DPD) for 19 years, and suffered from diabetes. While a manageable disease, diabetes requires stringent medical supervision and regular check-ups. However, constant pressure of work and no sick pay, led to Lane missing vital hospital appointments.

Classed as self-employed, workers at companies like DPD have no employment rights like holiday or sick pay, maternity leave, redundancy pay or contractual hours. They work on zero hours contracts—at the beck and call of employers—and are paid for each delivery/job done. Time off at DPD incurs a daily fine of £150, unless a substitute driver can be found, plus loss of earnings.

Lane's widow Ruth, who works in the food hall at retailer Marks and Spencer, told the *Guardian*, "There was a constant threat of a fine. They had to deliver the parcels to tight slots and the pressure to get them done was huge. He was putting the company before his own health. He wasn't able to do his parcels first and make the hospital appointments, so he would cancel on the day.

"He collapsed in January 2017 and they [DPD] knew that because they collected his van. It was after that Don cancelled three appointments. DPD had a duty of care to make sure he got to those appointments, but they failed in it." In March, fearful about his health, Don told her, "I think I am going to die."

As well as the workload being forced on him being a great danger to himself, the public was also endangered as Lane's job involved constant use of the highways. Lane first collapsed into a diabetic coma in December 2016, and again in January 2017, while at work in his van.

Last July, he was fined £150 for attending a hospital appointment, which he had informed the company about months in advance. A workmate commented, "They didn't even have the decency to tell him they had fined him. ... He only found out that he had been billed £150 when he received his next payslip."

During that check-up doctors found his blood pressure and cholesterol were high, and he was anaemic with rising levels of creatine in his kidneys, an ominous indicator of renal failure.

After being fined, Lane missed three appointments, writing to his line manager some months before his death: "I have cancelled so many appointments because I couldn't make the time to get there that the renal department have stopped treating me."

Lane collapsed again in September and then in December, after working during the Christmas rush. Despite feeling sick and vomiting blood, Lane struggled into work. He died in the Royal Bournemouth hospital on January 4, leaving behind his widow and a 22-year-old son.

After his death, a work colleague cited anonymously in the *Guardian* for fear of reprisals from DPD said, "Don was falling apart, but they wouldn't take it easy on him. They push drivers till they break. I definitely think they contributed to this. They knew Don was diabetic. They should have looked after him more."

DPD, an international parcel delivery company owned by the French state-owned postal service, made more than £100 million in profit out of its 5,000 UK employees in 2016. Its use of self-employed workers and punitive fines is emulated by other courier companies like ParcelForce—which imposes a £250 fine for a day's absence—and Hermes.

According to the McKinsey Global Institute, there are 5 million people employed either full- or part-time in the UK's gig economy for courier firms, websites such as Task Rabbit, minicab apps such as Uber or takeaways such as Deliveroo. Forty percent of these are working to supplement their meagre income, including many students. More than half are in the 18- to 24-year-old age range.

The unregulated working conditions in the gig economy mean wages are low. Research by the department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy found that 700,000 gig workers are paid below the national minimum wage of £7.50 an hour.

Last year, couriers for the food delivery company Deliveroo protested outside the company's London office against plans to pay workers £3.75 per delivery, instead of an hourly rate of £7 plus £1 per delivery.

Gig workers also miss out on workplace pensions to supplement the paltry state pension. According to the Pension Policy Institute, a million gig workers aged 25 today, each earning an annual income of £25,000, will miss out on £22,000 in employer contributions toward their pensions.

Growing opposition to the notoriously bad pay and conditions in the gig economy is expressed in the growing number of legal cases. Both DPD and Hermes face employment tribunal claims from workers who are demanding employee status.

Last year, The Doctors Laboratory (TDL), a company that provides pathology services, lost the argument that its cyclists, motorcyclists and van drivers were self-employed contractors.

Uber and CitySprint also lost similar cases, though Uber is appealing and its case is likely to be heard by the UK's Supreme Court in 2019. CitySprint responded by applying the ruling against it to just one courier. It still treats its other 3,000-plus couriers as self-employed.

In 2016, Theresa May's Conservative government commissioned a Review of Modern Employment—supposedly to address the grievances of gig workers. It received the findings, a report called *Good Work*, in July 2017. A totally disingenuous paper exercise from the outset, the review was chaired by Matthew Taylor who praised the "flexibility" and "choice" on offer to gig workers. Taylor is the chief executive of the Royal Society of the Arts. In 2005, he headed Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's Number 10 Policy Unit.

Maggie Dewhurst, 30, the courier who won her claim to be classed as an employee against CitySprint, said she was furious with the government's review. "This is the industry's dream result and does nothing to protect workers," she said. "By not enforcing our existing employment laws but instead talking about making the system 'easier to understand,' they are playing into gig employers' hands, many of whom are wilfully breaking UK law. How much more evidence do we need of gig economy exploitation?"

The government responded to Taylor's report last week, eliciting words of disappointment from the trade unions and Labour Party that the government was only promising consultation on possible changes to self-employment rules.

Labour MP Frank Field said the government had pledged "some really valuable gains for workers, though lamented "more consultation on the crunch issue of bogus self-employment" while "the country is crying out for action."

Labour's Shadow Business Secretary, Rebecca Long-Bailey, charged May with "more words with no real action to improve the lives of the millions of people in insecure work."

This rhetoric conceals the fact that it was under the last Labour governments of Blair and Gordon Brown (1997 to 2010) that the gig economy mushroomed.

In partnership with successive governments, the trade unions have laid the ground for the growth of the gig economy by suppressing strikes, and every struggle of the working class for decades.

The super exploitative gig economy is fast growing in Europe and internationally, as is opposition to the appalling conditions it entails. The financial software company, Intuit, predicts that, by 2020, 40 million workers in the US will employed under these conditions.

Deliveroo drivers struck in UK cities, Brighton and Bristol, last year as did their counterparts on the continent. Drivers held stoppages in five Belgian cities, including Brussels and Antwerp, in January, threatening to continue every Saturday thereafter. Strikes were held in Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

In New Delhi, Uber drivers went on strike for four days in February last year because they barely make Rs10,000 a month for 14- or 15-hour day and competition is increasing.