

London postal workers take strike action over coronavirus concerns

Our reporter
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Postal workers in several depots across south west London and other parts of the capital have mounted a de facto wildcat strike/work to rule over concerns regarding coronavirus safety. They did so in the face of the refusal of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) to mount any protest against Royal Mail management.

Workers have accused Royal Mail management of inaction over concerns that they are being exposed unnecessarily to the virus. As one worker told the WSWs, it seems to be the policy of Royal Mail to “keep quiet and hope it goes away.”

Managers are telling staff that they will not even be issued with hand sanitizer or alcohol wipes. Other managers have been trying to order sanitizers from Amazon to no avail.

Postal workers are asking why if a member of staff phones in sick with suspected but not clinically verified coronavirus, aren't the rest of the office being informed of the suspected case. Symptomatic staff are being told to stay at home and to self-isolate without being tested.

Postal workers are demanding action from Royal Mail to protect not only their work colleagues but family members as well. However, all Royal Mail is interested in is keeping costs down. Management has said they will only clean an office if there has been a clinically verified case of coronavirus.

Like all public services, postal workers come into daily contact with the members of the public. Handheld computers that the public sign to receive their mail are a possible source of spreading the virus both ways. Customer services points where people collect their mail are another source of potential contamination. One South West office has closed its customer service counter until further notice. Another office has suspended deliveries and collection of mail from post offices and pillar boxes.

The primary concern for postal workers across the country is the wall of secrecy from Royal Mail. Although

there has been one confirmed case of a postman catching the virus in Greater Manchester, Royal Mail have so far refused to say if he went out on delivery and whom he met. All that is known is that the man returned to work after having travelled to Italy and worked for a day before self-isolating himself having developed flu-like symptoms.

The *Manchester Evening News* reported that the worker, “is understood to be based at the South West Delivery Office in Old Trafford.” It was only after he tested positive for coronavirus that Royal Mail carried out a deep clean of the office. It is unclear if some or all his work colleagues have been or will be forced to self-isolate. Royal Mail would only say that the man was recovering at home “under clinical advice.”

Postal workers around the world are faced with the same hazards and deliberate inaction by their employers and governments. An employee with the US Postal Service has tested positive for coronavirus in Seattle, Washington. The infection came in the same state that saw the first US death from the virus.

The same issue confronts workers employed in other public service industries. Railworkers have told the WSWs that conductors on their franchises are refusing to pass through the train to collect ticket revenues due to the absence of protection. Drivers secured an agreement for extra time to sterilise controls after a change of shift.

Yesterday, Transport for London (TfL) confirmed that a London Underground train driver on the Jubilee Line tested positive for coronavirus. The driver, based at the North Greenwich depot, had recently returned from a holiday in Vietnam. The areas where the driver worked are being cleaned, including the depot and the trains. The Jubilee Line, between Stratford in east London and Stanmore in suburban north-west, is the third busiest tube line. Labour Party London Mayor Sadiq Khan has insisted that the network will continue to run as normal.

The Royal Mail walkouts in south London come after the CWU identified over 30 local disputes at depots and sorting offices nationwide. These attest to a growing level of militancy by workers in the face of a continual management offensive against their terms, conditions and jobs.

Next Tuesday, the CWU will announce the result of a nationwide industrial action ballot of 110,000 workers, which is set to record a large majority in favour of strikes.

This follows the annulling of the previous ballot by postal workers by the High Court on November 13. In October, CWU members voted by a 97 percent majority on a 76 percent turnout to strike. Refusing to defy the judgment, the CWU appealed it to the High Court with predictable results. Still refusing to call any strike to defy this attack on the democratic rights of its members, the CWU eventually concluded that to save face, and to maintain control of the workforce, meant calling another national strike ballot.

Yesterday, the Aslef train drivers' union announced that nearly 2,500 London Underground (LU) drivers have voted overwhelmingly to strike in a dispute over pay. A further 10,000-plus LU workers, including drivers and signallers, are being balloted by the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) in the same dispute. Any action by both sets of workers would completely shut down the London Underground network.

The walkouts by postal workers in Britain come after earlier developments in France. Around 70 percent of bus drivers in the Paris region working for Transdev and Keolis struck last week over the lack of proper action over the spread of coronavirus. There was a strike by workers in the RATP Paris public transport network at the Gare de Lyon. Action over coronavirus has also been taken by some teachers as well as a two-day work stoppage at the Louvre museum.



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