Royal Mail's putting profits before safety results in deaths of UK postal workers

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Postal workers are being forced to work in unsafe conditions, largely without personal protective equipment (PPE), adequate hand cleansing facilities or social distancing.

This has resulted in the deaths of at least three postal workers, while many more have either contracted the virus or are self-isolating. Three of the deceased workers have been named: Stefan Haluszczak, who worked at Coventry Parcels Hub, Akie Fenty from Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, and Bola Omoyeni, who was employed at the National Distribution Centre in Northampton.

Haluszczak, who had worked for Royal Mail for eight years, was well-respected at his depot.

Fenty, a 45-year-old father of one, described as normally "fit and healthy," had been fighting the virus for two weeks. He had only just been released from Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, where he was treated for a chest infection, when he collapsed and had to be rushed back to hospital. His girlfriend, Lisa Masson, said he sent her a text message "at about 11:15 pm, saying, 'I love you, this is f****** crazy.'" Just 45 minutes later he passed away.

Omoyeni, originally from Nigeria, had worked for Royal Mail for 30 years. His distraught colleagues described him as a "gentle giant" and "a big man with a big heart." He, too, died within hours of being taken to hospital. His friend, Kenny Daodu, wrote that he was "a family man and had plans for his children."

Confronted with the deaths of fellow workers, a management more concerned with upholding "shareholder value" than the safety of their staff, and a trade union refusing to mobilise against Royal Mail, postal workers are taking matters into their own hands.

Last month saw walkouts in Southwark, London and Bridgewater in the south west. This month, postal workers at several Royal Mail sites have taken unofficial action over their safety concerns, including Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife.

Parcelforce drivers in Swansea, Wales staged a protest in the car park over the "lack of proper measures" by management to deal with the danger of the coronavirus spreading in the workplace. A manager threatened to call the police to report a social gathering.

At the Longton Delivery Office in Stoke-on-Trent, 50 workers walked out after being forced to work dangerously close to each other.

Workers at the Warrington Delivery Office downed tools after a manager who had been "handing out workloads and van keys all week" was admitted to hospital and reportedly tested positive for coronavirus.

In Didcot, postal workers walked out of their depot after it was not deep cleaned when a staff member became ill with COVID-19.

At another Oxford office, postal workers took unofficial action over lack of safety measures, forcing bosses to take the mail out of the building before they would handle it.

Royal Mail's ruthless money-making operation is putting lives at risk in order to boost profits. According to the Communication Workers Union (CWU), about 20 percent of Royal Mail staff are currently off work, amounting to 26,000 postal workers who are either ill, self-isolating or looking after relatives. With the union saying it is "busier than Christmas," those working report they are "exhausted by the extra workload" and struggling to cover for absent colleagues amid a growing mountain of parcels, as more people who are at home order goods for delivery. They are also forced to deliver junk mail to millions of customers. The only reason for this is to allow Royal Mail to maintain

advertising revenue at the expense of postal workers' health.

Royal Mail, which claims that it "take(s) the health and safety of our colleagues very seriously," turned down a request by postal workers for an extra day off during the Easter break. Royal Mail human relations boss Sally Ashford said having a day off was "not consistent with our objectives"—that is, making as much money as they can by trampling on postal workers' health.

Reporting a shortage of basic items such gloves, masks and hand sanitisers, one worker said postal employees were being "forced to choose between their jobs and their health."

A postal worker from the north of England said, "It is more than two weeks since the lockdown, and we are in a situation where there is still a lack of PPE [personal protective equipment], there is still a lack of sanitisers. I am scared that my job will be in danger if I refuse to do a task because I believe it puts me in an unsafe position."

Another said, "When this was all kicking off, we were saying [to management] we need this stuff. However, our big boss upstairs just said 'no, you just need to wash your hands.' I would love to wash my hands, but nowhere is open. Everything is shut. It is ridiculous."

When workers have fallen ill at work, managers have refused to deep clean the area where they worked. In Greenock, when a worker was hospitalised with COVID-19 symptoms, postal workers went on strike until the area was cleaned. One worker told the *Greenock Telegraph,* "They actually had people working where the ill employee had been. Managers have done nothing about it and are refusing to clean any of their stuff."

In Peterborough, where a postal worker was sent home after testing positive for the virus, Royal Mail failed to contact colleagues who may have come into contact with him and they were made to work as normal.

In Oxford, a member of staff was tested for COVID-19. While the van he used was cleaned, the depot "was cleaned by a man with a rag and a spray bottle," a worker said.

Royal Mail can act with such calculated contempt only due to the CWU. On three occasions over the last two years postal workers have voted for national strike action to defend their pay and working conditions. On all three occasions, the CWU has refused to call a strike.

Earlier this month, the union called off a strike that had received almost unanimous backing in a ballot, instead offering up postal workers to the Conservative government as a "fifth emergency service." The deadly consequences of that action are now being felt. This is all on the heads of the CWU. Even now, as postal workers are dying and the danger of infection is massive, it refuses to pull the whole workforce out on strike until Royal Mail can guarantee their safety.

Postal workers are right to look to themselves rather than the union in the fight against dangerous working conditions. The CWU bureaucracy has shown it will only spout hot air about workers' safety while seeking to protect its handsome pay packets and privileges as the "negotiating partner" with corrupt management. Postal workers should organise rank-and-file committees of action to coordinate and lead a national fightback, linking up with delivery workers at Amazon, DPD, UPS and elsewhere who face similar conditions.

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