

# Postal workers stop work in Peterborough and High Wycombe, England, over COVID-19 safety fears

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Royal Mail workers at delivery offices in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire and High Wycombe, near London, have walked out over COVID-19 concerns.

In Peterborough, staff at the Werrington office walked out May 16 after a manager tested positive for COVID-19. Postal workers believed the manager was not following social distancing guidelines. Their concerns were proven correct when several staff were tested and found to be positive for COVID-19. On Sunday, the *Peterborough Telegraph* confirmed that four postal workers had contracted coronavirus.

At High Wycombe's delivery office, a postal worker has been diagnosed with coronavirus. Workers at the delivery office had raised concerns with management but were ignored.

The *Bucks Free Press* interviewed two postal workers who wished to remain anonymous due to fear of reprisals by management. They were "fed up" with the blatant disregard managers at the Queen Victoria Road delivery office had for safety. There was still a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing was not being observed.

One worker said, "You would think that a company such as Royal Mail would be on point with the current COVID situation. Such a pity they are falling way below good working conditions. It took them weeks to get any PPE to its staff. There are breaches of social distancing happening many times each day. We are currently sharing vans, but after each use, the vans are not being wiped down."

Another worker added, "A postman in the depot on Queen Victoria Road has tested positive for the coronavirus and 100 people are working there with

little PPE given (well, one bottle of sanitiser each). Social distancing just is not being implemented, and I feel the whole office is at risk as well as the public."

The safety problems in the two offices are replicated in delivery and sorting offices all over the country and internationally.

Last month, a 25-year-old employee at Belgium's national delivery company, Bpost, died from COVID-19. Last Wednesday, Bpost workers stopped work in the Ixelles area of Brussels in protest at workloads. There has been a near doubling of parcel volume as the use of online shopping has shot up due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following meetings with union representatives, the company agreed to hire additional temporary staff from next week. Some workers returned to duties after hearing the news, others said they would wait until Monday to see if the additional staff materialise.

Postal workers have died, and hundreds of workers have tested positive in the United States. Approximately 300,000 people have signed an online petition urging the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to demand hazard pay for all United Parcel Service (UPS) workers during the pandemic.

Speaking to the *Bucks Free Press*, Chad Croom, a CWU branch secretary at High Wycombe, gave an interview that provides a devastating indictment of the role of the trade union bureaucracy.

His message was that nothing could be done to fight the conditions being imposed by management because postal workers are too committed to public service for their own good! Croom stated, "Our members are very conscientious about the service we provide to the public and splitting shifts, different duty patterns,

reducing the daily service or even failing deliveries are not something many of them wish to do. The nation has been reminded of how vital our service is during this crisis and to reduce it in any way is seen by many as failing our customers.”

This, Croom maintained, was preventing the CWU from being able to properly defend its members: “Unfortunately this encourages many of them to put the delivery of a parcel or letter before their own safety. This is not the view of the union who believe our members safety should be paramount. It is however a difficult message to convince our members of at times. Especially when one of the offices in our branch refused to work in what they felt was unsafe conditions and as a result had their pay stopped for what the business classed as unofficial industrial action.”

Without questioning the conscientiousness and commitment of postal workers, Croom is simply repackaging the “public service” nostrums the CWU used as the basis in March, for cancelling proposed national industrial action to oppose attacks on jobs and working conditions despite a near 95 percent vote in favour. Within hours of the result, the CWU announced it would not call its 110,000 members out, but was instead offering postal workers up as an “additional emergency service” during the coronavirus pandemic.

After the CWU withdrew the strike threat, Royal Mail responded with undisguised contempt to postal workers, implemented no safety measures and then announced an end to Saturday deliveries that threatens 20,000 jobs. The CWU agreed to this change on May 1, citing a meaningless promise that it would only be a temporary measure.

Croom’s reference to Royal Mail treating a refusal by one office to work in unsafe conditions as industrial action points to the fundamental reason why postal workers might be reluctant to act in defence of their safety.

Throughout the pandemic, the trade unions have either never called strike action or, in the case of the CWU, sabotaged a vote to take it. To cover their backs, the CWU et al then said they would “support” members who exercised their legal right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions. This conveniently meant that the CWU did not need to call its members out or extend any genuine protection against victimisation. Croom now admits that Royal Mail management, who

clearly did not read the CWU memo, acted as if industrial action had been called and victimised postal workers regardless.

The CWU greenlighted this attack at High Wycombe, as it has throughout the UK. But Croom has the gall to conclude by asserting that, thanks to “pressure” from the CWU nationally on Royal Mail, there are now “ample” face masks, hand gel, gloves and wipes available to workers. Problem solved!

Contrary to Croom’s portrayal of a loyal and docile workforce, there have been many actions by postal workers to protect themselves throughout the UK. In March, walkouts took place in Southwark, London, and Bridgwater in the southwest. In April, postal workers at Bury St. Edmunds, Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife took unofficial action over safety. The essential conclusion that must now be drawn is that the fight for safe working means postal workers taking matters into their own hands, organising rank-and-file committees wholly independent from the CWU—the Royal Mail’s industrial police force.



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