

Walkout by sorting office workers at Barnsley Royal Mail after coronavirus outbreak

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Royal Mail workers at the central post sorting office in Barnsley, South Yorkshire walked out yesterday after colleagues tested positive for coronavirus.

Dozens of workers remained outside the building on Pitt Street for several hours while a clean took place. Managers told them not to speak to the press. Many nonetheless told local reporters that they had booked personal coronavirus tests and expected to stay away from work until receiving their results. Some criticised the fact that the use of face masks had not been made mandatory.

Following discussions, new working arrangements were agreed between Communication Workers Union (CWU) representatives and local management.

A company spokesperson gave the standard lie: “Royal Mail takes the health and safety of its colleagues, its customers and the local communities in which we operate very seriously.

“Following positive testing for coronavirus at the Barnsley delivery office, we have carried out a full, enhanced clean of the building.”

“We are working to keep disruption to mail deliveries to a minimum as we address the concerns of our colleagues.”

In fact, keeping disruption “to a minimum”, to ensure a continued flow of profits to their shareholders, is Royal Mail’s only concern.

At least four Royal Mail workers are known to have been killed by coronavirus.

Cases of COVID-19 have produced multiple walkouts by postal workers at sites all across the country, amidst reports of inadequate safety procedures.

Earlier this month, six new cases were reported at the Wellingborough delivery office in Northampton—and two workers ended up in hospital. Two weeks earlier, there were walkouts over safety fears at Peterborough,

Cambridgeshire and High Wycombe, near London, after employees tested positive for the virus. The month before, postal workers at Bury St. Edmunds, Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife took unofficial action over safety.

Speaking to local reporters and on social media, workers have repeatedly pointed to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitiser and basic hygiene facilities, and warned that social distancing is not being properly facilitated by management. Many have expressed concerns that speaking out would endanger their livelihoods, leaving them “forced to choose between their jobs and their health.” Another worker said, “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.”

The CWU has played a central role in allowing this dangerous, intolerable, situation to continue. Just days before the imposition by the Johnson government of the March 23 lockdown, the CWU called off a national strike to offer up its members as an “additional emergency service” in “the interests of the nation”. The union isolated workers by putting the responsibility on them as individuals not to work if they do not feel safe—while appealing to Royal Mail to implement safe working practices!

Workers have been largely kept in the dark about events, including outbreaks and walkouts, in other workplaces and left at the mercy of arrangements between the union and management. The Royal Mail spokesperson at Barnsley defended safety practices at the sorting office by saying, “All staff have been briefed about the social distancing measures jointly agreed by local management and the CWU.”

The latest coronavirus outbreak at Royal Mail

underscores the pressing dangers confronted by workers in all sectors of the economy. Just in Barnsley, workplace outbreaks of the virus have taken place at an ASOS warehouse, a meat processing plant and, only last week, a recently reopened primary school.

ASOS confirmed in May that nine workers at its Barnsley warehouse, forced to work through the lockdown, had been infected with coronavirus. Five hundred workers staged a walkout in March, with 98 percent saying they felt unsafe. At the meat slicing factory in Wombwell, run by Cranswick Convenience Foods, seven workers have been hospitalised—three of whom died. Last Thursday, the Joseph Locke Primary School was forced to close after three staff members tested positive for COVID-19. Over 140 staff and teachers have now been tested and are awaiting the results.

These workers are members of the GMB and National Education Union and these organisations have played the same role as the CWU in keeping members in the dark and demobilising opposition to the employers.

It is a 15-minute walk between the school and the Pitt Street sorting office. It does not take an epidemiologist to point out that coronavirus is still circulating in and around Barnsley, or to warn of the potential for a rapid spread through different sections of the population. The spree of outbreaks concentrated among working class communities in an economically deprived town also reflects the national situation, where the working class living in deprived areas are dying of COVID-19 at up to twice the rate experienced in the wealthiest locations.



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