

COVID-19 outbreaks at four workplaces in Swindon, UK

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A spate of COVID-19 outbreaks have been reported at four separate workplace locations in Swindon. Workers at a Royal Mail delivery office, a fire station, the Honda car factory, and a distribution centre for the food supermarket chain, Iceland, have been taken ill.

Swindon, in Wiltshire in the southwest of England, has a population of 200,000. The outbreaks at varying workplace locations across the town within the space of two days are unprecedented. Yet the response of the local media was to express “fears of another lockdown,” rather than focusing on the heightened threat the outbreaks posed to workers and their families.

Local Director of Public Health Steve Maddern stated blithely, “As lockdown restrictions are eased, we would expect to see small outbreaks to occur—this is usual, and it is being dealt with in the usual way.” He stressed that an outbreak was defined as “just two people at a linked situation.”

This is in line with a pattern of official indifference nationally. Local health officials and the Public Health bodies have sought to minimise any disruption to the operations of the corporations as outbreaks of the virus have flared up in the meat processing industry and retail distribution centres in Wales and the north of England. Employers have been absolved of all responsibility, while the onus has been shifted onto workers and the public to follow loose guidelines on personal hygiene.

The Royal Mail delivery office in Dorcan, Swindon, with around 1,000 staff, was closed for 48 hours from July 21 to organise a deep clean, after two postal workers tested positive for the virus. Public Health England (PHE) was reported as satisfied that procedures had been followed and there were no outstanding concerns. While postal workers were sent

home, no mandatory testing was organised and, according to one account, they were informed that they could report back to duty before receiving their results.

Since the start of the pandemic, Royal Mail has been a flashpoint for walkouts and stoppages by postal workers over the lack of social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) in delivery and sorting offices around the UK. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that 40 postal workers, mail sorters, messengers and couriers have died after contracting COVID-19. Concerns had been raised by postal workers at the Swindon delivery office back in March about the failure to provide gloves and hand sanitiser.

On July 22 it was announced that three firefighters tested positive at Swindon fire station. Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service issued a press release stating that the organisation of further testing would be conditional on whether other staff became symptomatic. Assistant Chief Fire Officer James Mahoney said there was no requirement to review existing practices in the workplace to safeguard against COVID-19.

The fire and rescue service are overstretched nationally due to years of job cuts and a failure by the government to introduce priority testing. Services in the UK were operating with 11,500 firefighters fewer than in 2010, according to the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). The government has ignored calls made by the FBU to introduce priority testing. In April, the union estimated that up to 12 percent of firefighters and control staff nationally were in self-isolation.

Honda posted an on-site notice on July 21 that a worker at its factory in south Marston had tested positive for the virus. The risk of transmission to the 3,000 workers employed at the site has been

underplayed by the company, which has withheld details of the extent of infections and continued production. It citing the authority of PHE that it is complying with all safety requirements to maintain a “Covid-secure site.”

The developments at Honda should serve as a warning to all car workers in the UK. The company suspended production from March 18 and reopened in early June, along with Nissan in Sunderland. BMW, PSA and Ford resumed production in mid-May. In the US, after the auto giants were forced to temporarily shut production due to walkouts by car workers, the resumption of production has led to a wave of infections.

Attempts at cover-ups have unravelled, most clearly at the Iceland distribution centre in Bridgemoor, which employs over 700 workers and is operated by XPO Logistics.

The distribution hub has remained open with the approval of PHE, even as the number of workers testing positive has more than quadrupled after a mobile testing unit was set up on-site July 29. The previous Friday there were 13 reported cases. Based on the most up-to-date figures, 64 cases have been confirmed and two workers have been hospitalised. A total of 150 staff are self-isolating.

Swindon accounted for the highest increase in coronavirus cases per 100,000 of the population in England in the final week of July. The outbreak at the Iceland distribution centre was the most important factor in the increased ratio from 19.8 per 100,000 the previous week to 48.6 per 100,000.

As far as the Director of Public Health is concerned, however, testing and tracing is simply a case of compiling statistics with no consideration given to any measures of containment that would interfere with the flow of business. Maddern declared that the risk of a wider community outbreak “remains low.”

A few days later, five workers bused from Swindon to the Bakkavor cake factory in the nearby town of Devizes tested positive.

Official irresponsibility is meeting with significant resistance. The empty assurances of public health officials who sing from the same balance sheet as the government and corporations, has failed to convince around half of the workforce at the Iceland distribution centre to return to work.

Opposition is developing independently of the unions. Speaking to BBC Radio Wilshire, Unite official John McGookin stated, “As I understand it now, a lot of the workforce have voted with their feet and decided it’s not safe to go to work at the minute.”

McGookin acknowledged that XPO Logistics was refusing to speak to the union but issued no call to mobilise against the company. He said he had no idea why the company had not closed the site.

This is self-serving rubbish. The conduct of XPO Logistics and Iceland has a definite class logic, which Unite tries to conceal. The risk of infection and death is viewed as collateral damage in the pursuit of profit. XPO Logistics has followed the same course at the distribution centre it operates on behalf of ASOS in south Yorkshire, where they refused to close the site for a deep clean after nine workers tested positive for the virus in May. Its reckless actions have been backed to the hilt by the local Labour authority.

Further evidence of a growing intransigence among workers has been expressed at the Bakkavor cake factory in Devizes, which employs 540. On Monday evening, workers staged a strike from 6 p.m. to midnight over having to work in unsafe conditions after the infections of the Swindon workers were discovered.

This emerging opposition must find organised political expression. A socially responsible approach to the pandemic is inconceivable as long as policy is dictated by the corporate elite and its stooges.

The Socialist Equality Party has outlined how a fight can be taken forward in its call for workplace safety committees. This perspective is already finding traction among US workers, with the development of a network of such committees being established in the major car plants, at Fiat Chrysler and Ford.



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