

Three postal workers test positive at UK Royal Mail's Medway Mail Centre

Paul Lee
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Postal workers at Medway Mail Centre are still concerned after three postal workers tested positive for coronavirus, despite Royal Mail's claim to have cleaned the delivery office.

Only opened in 2012, the Medway in Rochester, Kent, is categorised as being "state-of-the-art." The contraction of COVID-19 by three postal workers demonstrates that Royal Mail is continuing to sacrifice workers' health in a scramble for profit.

A Royal Mail spokesperson trotted out the usual palliatives saying, "Royal Mail takes the health and safety of its colleagues, its customers and the local communities in which we operate very seriously."

The Medway Mail Centre joins a long list of Royal Mail offices that have had outbreaks of coronavirus. Last month, after an outbreak among 12 staff, 900 postal workers at Manchester's main Oldham Road mail depot were told they might have the deadly virus. Even so, they were informed that it would be four days before they were tested. If workers wanted a test before then, they were told it would involve a drive to an out-of-town location.

The testing programme was outsourced to the private sector. G4S, the firm given the contract, eventually turned up at the depot but would only test workers on the day shift and refused to cover the evening shift—saying its contract only covered carrying out tests until 6 p.m. Manchester City Council was forced to contact the Department of Health and Social Care to complain, with all the workers eventually tested.

Royal Mail's Clacton delivery office, in Oxford Road, Clacton - On-Sea, had to undergo an urgent deep clean after Royal Mail was informed that an employee had contracted COVID-19. Six cases were found at the Wellingborough delivery office in Northampton and two workers ended up in the hospital.

There have been walkouts over safety fears at Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, and High Wycombe, near London, after employees tested positive for the virus. Postal workers at offices in Bury St. Edmunds, Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife took unofficial action over safety.

The worry of catching the virus is having a significant impact on postal workers' physical and mental health. Darren Beech, who worked at the Kidsgrove delivery office, committed suicide and was found by his two brothers who visited his Kidsgrove home on May 17. He was reported to be deeply worried about the coronavirus and felt "unprotected." Beech was already anxious about the state of his home and his financial situation. North Staffordshire assistant coroner Margaret Jones said, "The deceased was anxious over the state of repair of his house, financial matters and health issues. He was not coping well during the COVID-19 lockdown."

Darren's brother, Brian, said in a statement, "He was recently worried about finances, although I'm not aware if he had any serious debt. He was also recently worried about the COVID-19 situation as he said Royal Mail did not adequately protect him at work."

Other deaths have drawn attention to working conditions at Royal Mail. In August, delivery worker Mark Cremer collapsed and died while on his round. The 55-year-old man was found unconscious by a member of the public and died in Worthing Hospital. A review of Royal's Mail's safety procedures has been called for.

Cremer, based at Lancing Delivery Office in West Sussex, was working during the hottest part of August as temperatures exceeded 34 degrees C (93 F). It is standard for postal workers to be out on delivery for

three to four hours in the searing heat. Cremer was not the only postal worker to die in the hot weather. Phil Bentham from Barrow-in-Furness, aged 59, died at the end of his round during the same week as Cremer. It is reported that Bentham had recently returned to work after 17 weeks of shielding from COVID-19.

What is clear to many postal workers is that delivery offices are dangerous to their health.

Postal worker and writer Dan Bradley revealed the horrendous situation facing postal staff—as their workload was ramped up during the pandemic—in a recent *Guardian* article. “The truth is, since lockdown started in March, my days begin with nausea. The job looks so good on paper, but the reality is barely tenable. Like many postal workers hired since privatisation and an increasing number of people in my office, I am on a part-time contract with little to no chance of full-time hours. My annual take-home income, due to the part-time hours, is so low that I simply cannot pay the bills. Even before lockdown forced everyone indoors, causing a huge surge in online parcel deliveries, the workload was backbreaking. A colleague showed me his pedometer—he had walked 16 miles that day. Despite only being in his early 30s, he has received cortisone injections in his feet and shoulders to work through the pain. His situation is not uncommon; plantar fasciitis is endemic, and I see a lot of illness, injury and burnout.”

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) offered its sympathies to the family of Phil Bentham and Mark Cremer, “who died in sad circumstances and we fully understand the grief and anxiety amongst Phil and Mark’s work colleagues in their respective delivery units where emotions are naturally running high.”

But the brutal working conditions that exist in Royal Mail are down to not only Royal Mail, but are the product of the union’s collaboration with the company going back decades.

The CWU is currently in negotiations with Royal Mail after boasting that it has brought Royal Mail to the table and is demanding adherence to the 2017 Four Pillars Agreement. The CWU claims this heralded a new way of working that enshrined postal workers’ pay and conditions in law. As the WSWs has explained, the Four Pillars deal was a sellout and included an inferior pension scheme, reduction in working hours in return for productivity boosts through alterations to delivery

routes, new duty patterns, new working practices, and greater use of technology to monitor performance.

Behind the backs of workers, the CWU is agreeing on fundamental changes in working practices that will be to the detriment of most postal workers. To clear the path for these changes, the union has cleared 600 disagreements off the table so that Royal Mail will be given free rein to impose revisions or job cuts without the threat of strike action.

Whatever is agreed, it will mean massive job cuts and a stepping up of productivity. It is being mooted that the Royal Mail will seek the end of the Universal Service Obligation agreement, with Saturday letter deliveries threatened. Another rumoured action is the break-up of Royal Mail, with its parcels company GLS sold off.

Based on the CWU’s record, it will not fight these drastic changes to postal workers’ pay and conditions but will instead collaborate in their imposition. Cremer and Bentham, along with the four postal workers who have died from COVID-19, will not be the last such tragedies as a result of Royal Mail’s profit drive and the CWU’s treachery.

To oppose the ongoing onslaught of their jobs and conditions, postal workers must organise themselves independently of the CWU. The Socialist Equality Party is fighting for the formation of rank-and-file workplace safety committees in every sector. Last week, the SEP formed an education workers rank-and-file committee, in opposition to the unsafe reopening of schools. We urge postal workers to contact the SEP about your conditions at work and experiences during the pandemic.



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