Huge COVID-19 outbreak at Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency exposes fraudulent UK lockdown

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A massive, sustained COVID-19 outbreak at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) offices and call centre in Swansea, Wales has exposed the Conservative government's fraudulent "national lockdown" and contempt for workers' lives.

The DVLA is a government agency under the Department of Transport. Since September, 535 workers have tested positive, the largest known number of infections linked to a single employer and workplace. The DVLA has a total workforce of 6,000 people, meaning more than one in 12 have been infected in the last five months.

It is certain that these infections have contributed to the appalling toll of infections and deaths in the Swansea Bay area, where more than 26,000 cases have been registered and 828 COVID-related deaths.

This disaster is the direct result of actions taken by management at DVLA and the loosened restrictions implemented during this lockdown compared to the original shutdown in March--despite the development of a more infectious strain of the virus and the overwhelming pressure on the National Health Service (NHS). It has been facilitated by the Labour Party and the trade unions, who have suppressed all opposition to the Tories' herd immunity policy, exposing huge numbers of people to the virus in order to keep the economy producing profits.

According to the *Guardian*, roughly 1,800 workers are currently being asked to come into the office. During the lockdown last spring, just 250 workers were kept on site. One employee told the newspaper, "We sit back-to-back, just one metre apart. They say 'the two-metre rule only applies if you're face to face'." He said the virus had "spread like wildfire. Loads have tested positive. More than I can count'."

Another employee explained, "On each floor there are only two sets of toilets: ladies and gents. There are four kitchens on each floor too. All the teams are sharing the facilities—It's high risk. There are cases on every floor now." Workers were "all worried. We are all scared. Lots and lots of people have been ill. We have had staff in hospital."

The outbreak has been so severe, she explained, and so widely known, that local people have been wary of contact with DVLA employees. "People will not go into local shops if DVLA staff are there because they are scared of catching it from us. I have family I have been unable to visit because I work in DVLA."

Neither worker gave their real name for fear of victimisation.

Managers have actively sought to prevent the outbreak being recognised and contained. A complaint received by Public Health Wales's outbreak control team warned that DVLA workers had been asked to turn off test-and-trace apps so that they were not notified of close contact with an infectious person and required to self-isolate.

Workers report that any COVID-related absence they do take is counted against their sick leave, with absences lasting longer than 10 days resulting in a warning. Employees with symptoms have reportedly been told to come in to work and vulnerable workers have been refused requests to work from home.

The DVLA outbreak has a long history, with nothing done to prevent it by any responsible bodies.

A few days after the first national lockdown began on March 23, *Wales Online* reported workers' concerns: "We have to walk past people on a daily basis, the hand sanitiser is nearly finished, staff are distraught", "we all have to use the same lifts, pass scanners and doors", "The office cleanliness is below par, and the toilets are unclean."

Referring to the number of people still being asked to come into work, others warned, "There's no need to have that many staff there and it's hard to keep distance."

One employee said a colleague had suffered an anxiety attack after being told they would have to take unpaid leave if they wanted to keep out of the building.

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The threat of a mass walkout forced the DVLA to significantly reduce its services and the number of workers coming into the offices. In response, the agency called on the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), led by putative "left" Mark Serwotka, and with thousands of members in the DVLA offices, to help enforce a return to work. The union issued an update on July 31 noting briefly, "In DVLA, where telephony and IT cannot be managed from home, staff have continued to do essential work, and a more gradual return to the office continues as the workplace is being made safe."

The same day, the BBC reported that the DVLA was recruiting 400 additional staff to clear a backlog of work.

By the end of the year, the results of the collusion between the employers and the PCS were clear. Between September and December 21, there were 352 cases at the agency's offices.

Workers at that time were telling *Wales Online* that they were being asked to hot desk with different teams, working across different floors of the building. Others said, "Staff are being forced to work in a building with no opening windows," and that "Staff are not being informed if they have been in close contact with someone in work who has tested positive for the virus."

One worker warned, "The hygiene levels are very poor. Each desk has plastic screens in front of them, these are never cleaned. We are told that Public Health Wales and Swansea Council have been on site, I suspect that the areas they are being shown are selected and are not a true reflection."

"Staff with underlying health conditions have been asked to sign 'waivers' which are then sent to HR for those who wish to attend work, knowing that these people suffer from severe illness."

The DVLA was forced to admit an outbreak and close one their offices from December 24 to January 4. The company's main site was allowed to reopen with the pathetic "concession" that all requests for leave would be granted, so long as the employee had leave left to take, between December 22 and January 4.

All sites were reopened on January 4 with the PCS declaring, "It is our preference that the contact centre remains closed," promising only to "to press for the contact centre to be closed until the risk of Covid is much lower."

After all this, Serwotka had the gall to declare on behalf of the PCS, in response to the new outbreak, "It is a scandal that DVLA are not doing more to reduce numbers."

If it is "a scandal" that the company has put in place policies allowing the mass infection of the workforce, what word best describes the union which let it happen? Serwotka proposes nothing more than handing responsibility back to the criminals in the Tory government whose every policy has been aimed at keeping workers in unsafe workplaces: "Ministers must intervene and ensure DVLA are doing their utmost to enable staff to work from home and temporarily cease non-critical services," he said.

The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) warned that the government's assurances that employers would follow safety guidelines, watched over by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), were rotten lies. This was confirmed by outbreak after outbreak in workplaces—in warehouses, food distribution centres, food processing factories, textile factories, Royal Mail depots, bus garages and large farms.

Philip Taylor, a Professor of Work and Employment Studies at the University of Strathclyde, conducted a survey of call centre workers, reported by the WSWS, which he said "lifts the lid on the nightmare being endured by many agents." Significant outbreaks have since occurred at call centres in Doncaster, Motherwell and Newcastle.

Every warning has been confirmed under the current lockdown. The *Observer* reported January 17 that "no enforcement notices have been served on companies by Health and Safety Executive… inspectors for Covid safety breaches since the country went into the latest lockdown, despite being contacted 2,945 times about workplace safety issues between 6 and 14 January. Overall, just 0.1% of the nearly 97,000 Covid safety cases dealt with by the agency during the pandemic appear to have resulted in an improvement or prohibition safety notice, with not a single company prosecuted for Covid-related breaches of safety laws."

The DVLA outbreak makes clear that the exposure of the working class to the virus is the result of policy, not oversight. The facts must be uncovered and charges brought against those responsible in court, including the chief culprit, Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Workers must secure their own safety and oversight of their workplaces. Rank-and-file safety committees must be established, independent of the trade unions who have conspired in every step of the government's murderous back-to-work agenda. These committees will reach out to their fellow workers and organise action to close non-essential and unsafe workplaces and fight for full income support for those affected.

The Socialist Equality Party will lend every assistance possible to these initiatives. Please contact us here .

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