

Office staff at UK Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency ballot for strike after 535 COVID-19 infections and death of worker

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Workers are balloting for strike action at the UK's Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)—a government agency under the Department of Transport. Over 2,000 are being forced to physically attend their workplace at the DVLA offices in Swansea, south Wales, with an astonishing 535 members of the workforce (over 25 percent of those in the office) catching coronavirus during the last year.

At least one employee at the site has died after test testing positive for COVID-19.

Workers are demanding that almost the entire workforce be allowed to work from home during the pandemic. The DVLA outbreak is the largest at a UK workplace since the pandemic began.

Despite warnings that the DVLA building was an unsafe workplace during the early months of the pandemic, the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) only announced a strike ballot this month, to begin on February 19 and end March 11. The mood among the workforce for action was clear in a February “all-DVLA staff zoom meeting” called by the PCS. The union reported, “Over 90% of those attending the meeting voted in favour of strike action with 87% taking part.”

Were the PCS to sanction a strike, they are then required to give another two weeks notice to the employers before it can occur, under anti-strike laws.

PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka said, “It is a scandal that DVLA have insisted over 2,000 staff members come into work every day, despite having the biggest outbreak of Covid in an office workplace within the UK.”

It is not a “scandal” but a matter of life and death, with workers' lives at stake for every day that they are herded into the DVLA's offices. The fact that so many workers have been infected by COVID-19 is a result of what the British Medical Journal described as a policy of “social murder.”

The PCS and devolved Labour Party-controlled Welsh government are seeking to head off any action by DVLA

staff, which they fear could spiral out of their control. While expressing their disappointment with the PCS's ballot, a DVLA spokesperson said the union was working hand in glove with management to avoid a strike: “we are actively working with PCS on further steps that can be taken to keep staff safe on site.”

Speaking at Prime Minister's questions, Labour MP for Swansea West, Geraint Davies, offered the DVLA a potential lifeline to prevent strike action. “Given that BT are on standby to install home-secure technology to allow home working, will the prime minister meet with me and the union ahead of the strike ballot next week so that workplace numbers can be reduced until the vaccine is rolled out to keep people safe and avoid an unnecessary strike?”, he said.

By way of response, Prime Minister Boris Johnson played down the significance of the mass outbreak at the super spreader DVLA venue and of his government's own super spreader workplace safety guidelines. He claimed, “to the best of [his] knowledge”, that from a total workforce of 6,000 there were now only nine cases of COVID and that three of those individuals were currently working from home. Johnson promoted the lie that the DVLA was pursuing a working-from-home strategy.

The exposure of DVLA workers to a deadly disease is just one example of the thousands of employers who have put pressure on millions of employees to go into workplaces unnecessarily. This is core to the policy of the ruling elite's herd immunity policy which has put the profits of the corporations before life throughout the pandemic. A poll commissioned by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) suggests almost one fifth of those still working have been going into offices or other workplaces even though they could do their jobs from home.

The TUC's health and safety policy officer Shelly Asquith said, “Over 10,000 workers have died from Covid, and many others have long Covid, with long term health problems. It's the most serious workplace safety hazard in a

generation” She noted that the high numbers of workplace clusters is testament to the prevalence of the virus in workplaces.

Asquith declines to mention that it was the TUC which engaged in extensive behind-closed-doors discussions with the Tory government to orchestrate the mass return to unsafe workplaces and an end to last spring’s lockdown.

Keenly noting the ballot of DVLA workers, the *Financial Times* felt obliged to point to the obscene disparity between the government’s draconian attitude towards the public during the pandemic and that adopted towards business. FT employment columnist Sarah O’Connor, in a piece headlined “Covid rule-breakers face jail but careless employers go free,” noted, “The UK government has this year threatened 10-year prison terms for people who lie about their travel history, imposed £800 fines for people who go to house parties and paid for adverts that warn a takeaway coffee or chat on a park bench could ‘cost lives’...

“Yet the Health and Safety Executive, the UK regulator responsible for workplace safety, has not brought a single prosecution against an employer for breaking Covid-19 rules”.

The HSE have handled 179,873 Covid-related contacts but they have resulted in the desultory total of just 218 enforcement notices. Analysis by the *Observer* of the Health and Safety Executive’s (HSE) enforcement database reveals that not a single prohibition notice—allowing HSE inspectors to bring an immediate halt to all workplace activity where conditions are deemed damaging to workers health—has been issued since the beginning of the pandemic.

The HSE are operating on the basis that COVID-19 workplace outbreaks are not considered to fall within the parameters of their highest risk category—classified as “significant” rather than “serious”. Conservative Employment Minister Mims Davies defended the HSE in parliament by claiming that the effects of COVID fit the definition, “non-permanent or reversible, non-progressive and any disability is temporary”. This of a disease that has taken over 120,000 lives in Britain, with hundreds of thousands more contracting the disease and suffering long-term illness.

Public Health England released figures showing there has been 3,549 coronavirus outbreaks at assorted workplaces, including construction sites, offices and factories, since July 2020. In January alone, 25,000 concerned workers reportedly contacted the HSE.

As recently as the week from February 8, there were further 100 outbreaks at workplaces. The *Observer* noted that this was “despite the country still being in lockdown, with only essential workers supposed to be travelling to work.”

Inspectors operating on behalf of the HSE have told the media that the “significant” rating for COVID-19 prevents them from taking the appropriate action, namely issuing prohibition notices and making prosecutions. Speaking anonymously, one inspector told the *Observer* that they had been instructed to “walk offsite” should a workplace be overcrowded and where social distancing was not being observed, but they did not have the power to shut down such a venue. HSE internal instructions say the organisation will not support an inspector who attempts to issue a prohibition order on a “significant” rather than a “serious” case.

The HSE’s anti-scientific characterization of COVID-19 makes a mockery of its claim to be “responsible for the encouragement, regulation and enforcement of workplace health, safety and welfare, and for research into occupational risks in Great Britain.” It is a neutered organisation which has seen its funding and personnel slashed dramatically in the last decade.

Between 2010 and 2018/19, government funding for the HSE was cut by more than £100m. The number of HSE employees fell from 3,702 to 2,501 and the number of inspectors from 1,495 to 978 between 2009/10 and 2017/18. They oversee 1.4 million private sector businesses with at least one employee, including 7,700 with more than 250.

The task of ensuring workers’ safety falls to the workers themselves, independently of the HSE or the pro-business trade unions who collude with the government and the employers. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees, composed of trusted workers and democratically run independently of the unions, in every workplace.



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