

# Four-day strike at UK Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency demanding Covid-safe working conditions

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Workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters in Swansea, South Wales, began a four-day strike Tuesday. This is the first major industrial action taken at a workplace in the UK over coronavirus safety. More than 600 positive Covid cases have been reported at the DVLA's offices.

The 3,300 workers are striking due to DVLA's refusal to implement basic COVID-19 safety measures. For months now, up to 2,500 staff have had to physically attend their workplace at the DVLA's offices. This is despite at least 535 members of the workforce (over 25 percent of those in the office) catching coronavirus in the months since the pandemic began to January this year. At least one employee at the site died after test testing positive for COVID-19.

The DVLA is a major government employer, with more than 6,000 employed in Swansea across two sites: the DVLA's HQ and a contact centre in Swansea Vale. The workers deal with around 12 million calls every year regarding driving licences and vehicles.

Last December, Public Health Wales declared a coronavirus outbreak after more than 350 people were infected. Workers took to social media demanding management stop placing them in danger.

When the pandemic took hold in Britain last spring, the DVLA outbreak was inevitable as it refused to implement necessary safety measures at the site or provide the resources for remote work. In their determination to keep as many workers as possible herded into unsafe work settings, the fact that offices were major vectors of transmission of the virus was concealed by the authorities and corporations.

However, in January Public Health England released figures—via a Freedom of Information request from

BBC 5 Live—revealing the extent of a vast cover-up. They showed 60 suspected Covid outbreaks in offices in England in just the first two weeks of the January lockdown.

The BBC said of the FOI findings, “There were more than 500 outbreaks, or suspected outbreaks, in offices in the second half of 2020, more than in supermarkets, construction sites, warehouses, restaurants and cafes combined.”

By January, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) had reported 364 deaths in administrative occupations.

The DVLA strike was called after months of delay by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) and only after its failure in the last few weeks to come to an agreement in talks with DVLA management.

The union bureaucracy is responsible for workers confronting such a dangerous situation at the DVLA. Following the ending of last spring's lockdown, the PCS allowed the DVLA to begin bringing large numbers of employees back into the workplace in autumn. After the offices were forced to close in December due to a huge rise in infections, the union allowed them to reopen on January 4. It was only after another surge of infections in January took the number of infections to over 350, and amid rising anger among workers, that the PCS finally began organising a strike ballot. 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 percent of those attending the meeting voted in favour of strike action with 87 percent taking part.”

The ballot was held months after the December closure—from February 19-March 11—with workers voting to strike over by 71.6 percent on a 50.3 percent

turnout. The PCS used this mandate to resume talks with management that failed.

On March 16, the PCS said it had contacted Department for Transport permanent secretary, Bernadette Kelly, “for an urgent meeting” to “discuss the result of our ballot on Covid safety at the DVLA.” It said that it would hold off on serving a formal notice of industrial action until two days later (March 18) to allow the government time to respond. It was not until five days later, on March 23, that the union formally announced a strike date.

In its March 23 update, the PCS said it was “engaged in intensive talks with the employer this week and will present our proposals to ensure staff safety at the DVLA now and in the coming months and years.” PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka said, “Taking strike action is a last resort but if management continues to so flagrantly disregard workers’ safety, we will be left with no other choice.”

In a final update on April 1, the PCS said it “has been in intensive talks with the DVLA to try to reach agreement to address our members’ health and safety concerns and remove the necessity for taking industrial action.” Negotiations had not resulted in DVLA backing down on anything substantial. They only agreed “a reduction in the capacity of the site by removing over 300 desks” and “a revision of risk assessments which has led to a further 300 staff being sent home.”

The PCS is not opposed in principle to its members going back into DVLA offices during the pandemic, even under conditions in which a small fraction of the adult population have received two required vaccine doses. The PCS presented as a gain from the negotiations that it secured “A commitment on how to proceed in the talks over the coming months, in terms of extending home working, safety on site and any potential increase in the numbers of staff on site when it is safe to do so.”

The union made clear its plan to halt action after the strike ends on Friday and use it as a bargaining chip for further talks, saying, “The bigger the action, the better the deal we will be able to achieve when talks resume after the strike.”

The DVLA continues to play down the threat to its workforce, declaring this week, “There is currently not a single member of staff in the 10 day isolation period,

out of a workforce of more than 6,000.”

Such a statement is entirely in line with government propaganda that the pandemic is all but over, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson stating on Monday that everyone must move forward to “Step Two” of the “roadmap to freedom”.

The Tories have been able to impose their homicidal agenda only due to the collusion of the Labour Party and trade unions.

Until the pandemic is contained, and workplaces made entirely safe with the necessary social distancing and other protections in place, no worker should be forced into an office. Key workers involved in such work must be allowed to work from home and be provided with every resource to do this safely with no loss of pay. When remote work is impossible, they must be fully compensated for lost income over the entire time they are furloughed.

As far as the trade unions are concerned, whatever remote working is in place now can be ditched according to the government’s timeline for reopening the economy. The Trades Union Congress notes that the guidance on working from home has not changed and that everyone who can work from home should continue to do so until “at least 21 June.” Its April 2 document advised Johnson to work closely with the unions as “the UK Government eases restrictions following the third lockdown.”

The Socialist Equality Party is opposed to the health and lives of workers being sacrificed for the profit interests of the corporations and billionaires. It is calling for the formation of a Network of Rank-and-File Action Committees for Safe Workplaces. On Saturday April 10, there is an online meeting to discuss the way forward in building these fighting organisations. We urge DVLA workers and all others to register here to attend this vital event.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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