

UK: Second round of strikes at DVLA over safety at Covid-19 hotspot

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On Tuesday administration workers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) headquarters in Swansea, South Wales walked out for a second round of four-day strike action over Covid-19 safety concerns at the government run agency.

It follows the four days of strike action in the second week of April by 1,400 workers at the DVLA headquarters following a ballot of its members by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) which returned a mandate in favour of 71.6 percent in favour in a 50.3 percent turnout.

The DVLA employs around 6,000 staff at its headquarters and call centre across eight buildings in the city.

The source of the dispute is the continued insistence by management that it is necessary to keep more than 2,000 at work in the offices despite concerns over lack of social distancing and the fact that the workplace has been the centre of a major outbreak since the second half of last year, with over 600 cases and the tragic death of one worker since the start of the pandemic.

The DVLA is planning to bring hundreds of workers back from May 17 in line with the Conservative government's lifting of all restrictions. Those who have borne the brunt of the risk are administration staff on lower pay grades who have been denied the chance of remote working.

The outbreak at the DVLA is the highest number of infections linked to a single employer or workplace in the UK. This is made all the more damning at a site run directly by the government through the Department of Transport (DfT).

The industrial action called by the PCS are the only strikes officially sanctioned by any trade union over Covid-19 since the start of the pandemic. The work stoppages which have occurred to date were the result

of unofficial action with walkouts across Royal Mail and wildcat action at warehouses and in meat processing.

The PCS ensured that no strikes occurred last year after management drafted staff back after the spring lockdown, with numbers on site increasing from 400 to 2,300 in September. This fuelled a major outbreak in the autumn, forcing a limited closure in December, with a reopening on January 4 leading to a further outbreak. This brought the total number of cases from September to the end of January to 535, one in 12 members of staff.

It was only after these repeated outbreaks that the PCS finally moved towards holding a ballot in February. Even after it was handed the mandate in the ballot on March 11, the PCS immediately resumed talks with the DVLA.

PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka stated in an update that the last thing the union wanted was to mobilise its membership, saying, "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."

The DVLA refused to back down, with the only concession that it would reduce capacity by 300 after a review of the risk assessment. It was only then that the union named strike dates.

For the PCS, the strike is aimed at containing a broader eruption of opposition. A survey commissioned by the Trades Union Congress revealed that almost a fifth of workers who could work from home have been required to physically attend their workplace. According to a report by *BBC 5 Live* based on a Freedom of Information request to Public Health England, there were 500 outbreaks of Covid-19 in offices in the second half of 2020 and 60 suspected

outbreaks in offices in just the first two weeks of January.

The PCS wants to block any genuine mobilisation of its members alongside the DVLA workers and has confined support for the strike to financial donations. The union is paying strikers a paltry £40 per day. The PCS has a national membership of 200,000, the largest union in the civil service. It is forestalling strike action at the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) over the return to work.

In December, the DWP announced increased Jobcentre opening in 250 of the largest offices to six days a week, by introducing Saturday opening. On April 12, it announced the return to normal job centre opening hours, with more face-to-face interviews. The PCS has only organised a non-binding consultative ballot which opened on May 5 and closes on May 21.

At a PCS online rally held Tuesday to launch the strike at the DVLA, accounts showed that management has become more entrenched in the cover-up of workplace infections and intimidation of staff. A week before the strike action in early April there were another eight reported cases of infection.

Workers who have suffered Covid-19 are being dragged through the DVLA's attendance procedures. The level of harassment is so great that some workers report that they will opt out of having the Covid-19 vaccination because of fear of having to take time off if they develop an adverse reaction. The DVLA has refused to provide any undertaking that staff will not be penalised. The agency has also obstructed an investigation by the Health and Safety Executive into a staff member who died from Covid-19. It has only now submitted a report after a two-month delay.

In the face of this, the nominally left Serwotka framed his remarks as an appeal to the DVLA's CEO Julie Lennard. He referred to her throughout by her first name, underlining the cosy relationship the PCS is aiming to preserve with management. He pleaded, "Let Julie seize the moment and do what a real leader should do and recognise that she needs to change course. She needs to change course and recognise that every dispute needs to be ended with an agreement."

He continued, "What we need now is an orderly, agreed way of dealing with where we are, a wider return to work, an agreement that means that in the event of a third wave everyone knows that they have

not got to worry about going back to where we've been in August, over Christmas and into the beginning of this year."

Serwotka speaks not in terms of if but when a third wave will strike and commits himself to working with the DVLA, the DfT and the government to overcome opposition to their homicidal policy.

The rally provided a platform for local Labour MPs Stephen Kinnock and Christina Rees, and John McDonnell from the PCS parliamentary group. The Blairite Kinnock and Corbynites Rees and McDonnell united to conceal how the disastrous situation at the DVLA is due to the collusion of Labour and the unions with the Johnson government's reopening of the economy.

For all his bluster over the brutality faced by DVLA workers, McDonnell said nothing about the leaked comments by Prime Minister Boris Johnson to oppose lockdowns and "let the bodies pile high in their thousands". This would have drawn attention to the policy of social murder in which the Labour Party has acted as co-conspirator. Instead, he heaped praise on Labour MPs such as Kinnock for their "harassment" of the government over the situation at the DVLA.

DVLA workers cannot allow their struggle to be derailed by the PCS and Labour Party. They should demand that all work deemed essential must be conducted remotely. All non-essential staff must be furloughed on full pay.

No worker should be penalised under the attendance procedures for absence because of the effects of Long Covid, or side effects from having the vaccination.

This struggle requires the establishment of rank-and-file committees to mobilise the working class behind the DVLA strike against the Johnson government. We urge DVLA workers to support the initiative to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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