

World Socialist Web Site replies to DVLA spokesman over alleged “inaccuracies”

Tony Robson
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The World Socialist Web Site received a letter from Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) representative David Whitbread requesting changes be made to our recent article on a strike at the company’s offices over Covid-19 safety. Below is a reply by the article’s author, Tony Robson. Mr Whitbread’s original letter is included below.

Dear Mr. Whitbread,

Thank you for your email regarding my article on the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) “UK: Second round of strike action at DVLA over safety at Covid-19.” (May 5)

You do not specify the position you hold at the agency, but you are regularly cited in the media as a spokesman. It is in this capacity that you have approached the WSWS asking us to publish a press release on behalf of a “DVLA Spokesperson”.

We have made certain minor amendments to the article regarding three of the eight corrections you suggested. While these were of a secondary nature, we are more than happy to make such corrections to ensure accuracy in our reporting.

However, we are not prepared to amend the article on the substantive issues as you advise.

That your intention is to trivialise and essentially dismiss the gravity of the situation regarding the outbreak of Covid-19 at the DVLA offices in Swansea is made clear when you raise as one of the supposed “factual inaccuracies” in the article the statement that the outbreak is the biggest case linked to any single employer in the UK.

You provide no evidence to refute this. You merely assert that because it has not been defined as such by Public Health Wales (PHW) this should be retracted. In fact, it has been reported as the largest workplace outbreak by the *Guardian*, *Observer* and the *Daily Mirror*.

The *Guardian* on March 23 noted other major workplace outbreaks that do not come close to the DVLA, i.e., “Other large workplace outbreaks include an M&S sandwich supplier in Northamptonshire, where 324 workers tested positive in August, and a chicken processing plant in Anglesey, where 217 cases were identified by Welsh public health officials in June.”

Regarding the issue of inaccurate reporting and misleading information, we would encourage you to look closer to home. In January, the chief executive of the DVLA, Julie Lennard, made an apology to the Commons Transport Committee investigating the outbreak. Lennard had attempted to play down the fact that the outbreak at Swansea DVLA was triggered by the mass return to work in September 2020 of 2,300 workers, up from 400 in March, stating that the more than 500 reported cases of infections went all the way back to March. It was pointed out by the chair of the committee that

the total number from March to September was a “grand total of 11”. Lennard added, “It is true, but I apologise if that was misleading.”

Your email makes clear the DVLA has not let up in its ongoing attempt to massage the figures, as you reiterate Lennard’s self-confessed “misleading” statement that the current figures of over 600 infected include all infections at Swansea DVLA since March 2020, i.e., the “grand total of 11” cases prior to the September return.

You take exception to the wording of the article, which states that the outbreak forced a limited closure in December. But this is an accurate description of the scale of the problem which necessitated this intervention.

You maintain that this creates a misleading view. The proposed press release you advise us to publish states that the agency has “consistently worked” with Public Health Wales, Environmental Health and Swansea Bay Health Board to introduce a wide range of safety measures. This assertion does not withstand scrutiny. If the DVLA had conducted itself in the way you describe why did Swansea Bay University Health Board serve a formal health protection notice in October requiring the DVLA to cooperate with the incident control room as incidents of infection increased?

According to the *Observer* of January 31, 2021, the briefing written by the board’s executive director of public health, Keith Reid, noted that “there was reported initial difficulty in engaging with DVLA management and in getting senior management to understand the seriousness of the situation.”

You do not, we notice, challenge the disclosure in our article that the DVLA has obstructed the investigation of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) into the one case in which an infection had fatal consequences for a member of staff. We reported that the DVLA had delayed completing a report under RIDDOR [Reporting of Injuries, Disease and Dangerous Occurrence Regulations] on this tragic death for two months, which it is lawfully required to complete. This puts your claim that the “safety of our staff is paramount” into question.

Neither is any correction warranted to our contention that staff who have suffered Covid-19 have been put through the attendance procedures or are fearful of being penalised for absenteeism due to receiving the vaccination and developing an adverse reaction. The article states that the DVLA has refused to date to provide an undertaking that this will not be the case and there is no agreement on how Long Covid sufferers are to be treated—and you do not deny this.

In conclusion we decline your invitation to amend the article to include your four-paragraph press release on behalf of the DVLA, which condemns the industrial action currently undertaken by office workers who are members of the Public and Commercial Services union. This falsely maintains that their safety concerns are ill founded

and attempts to turn public opinion against them for exercising their right to secure a workplace in which their lives are not put in danger.

Your email confirms that the efforts of the DVLA are not dedicated to mitigating any further risk to its employees, even after hundreds of staff have suffered preventable transmission of the virus in the workplace. Your intention, rather, is to not only maintain staffing levels above 2,000, but to speed up the return to work after May 17 in line with the government's reopening of the economy and abandonment of all restrictions to contain the pandemic.

The DVLA is controlled by the Department of Transport and therefore the Swansea offices are under the control of the Conservative government. The WSWS does not function as a press agency for the British government. It is the independent online publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Our aim is to inform and mobilise the international working class and to defend science and a humane approach to the containment of the pandemic against the prioritisation of profit over human life.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Robson

I am writing to you to correct a number of factual inaccuracies in the piece.

Your piece mentions that DVLA has been the “centre of repeated outbreaks” and that reopening the contact centre on January 4 led “to a further outbreak”. This is wrong. There was one outbreak declared last December by Public Health Wales (PHW), specifically at DVLA's contact centre in Llansamlet (it was declared over in February 2021 by PHW). You may find the following link to PHW's website useful: <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/coronavirus-update-dvla-contact-centre-swanea>. Please note from the above link that the number of cases identified amongst employees that normally work in the contact centre since 1 December 2020 was 96.

You also state that “The outbreak at the DVLA is the highest number of infections linked to a single employer or workplace in the UK”, you will note from the PHW website that there is no reference to this being “the highest number of infections linked to a single employer or workplace in the UK”, so you may wish to amend your copy as the claim is not substantiated by PHW.

Your piece also mentions that since the second half of last year there have been “over 600 cases”—this figure includes cases going back to March last year—you may find the attached link helpful, which has the relevant data in Annex B: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4820/documents/48474/default/>.

You also state in your piece that the declared outbreak in the contact centre had the effect of “forcing a limited closure in December”. I should explain that DVLA was not forced to close the contact centre and that we made the decision to extend the closure of the contact centre from 24 to 28 December to include the period between Christmas and New Year.

Your piece states that the latest industrial action follows four days of strike action in the second week of April by 1,400 workers at the DVLA headquarters—I can confirm that there were on average 750 staff taking industrial action each day.

Your piece also states that DVLA employs around 6,000 staff at its headquarters and call centre in the city, I should advise that DVLA staff work across 8 buildings in total and not just the buildings on our main site and our contact centre.

In the piece you refer to the PCS online rally held on Tuesday to

launch the industrial action at DVLA and mention that “A week before industrial action there were another eight reported cases of infection”. This is also wrong as there were no positive cases among our 6,000 staff in that week.

Your piece also mentions that “Workers who have suffered Covid-19 are being dragged through the DVLA's attendance procedures”—this is also wrong. No warnings have been issued to any member of staff who has had to self isolate due to the pandemic or has suffered any adverse side effects from taking a Covid-19 vaccine.

Grateful if you could arrange for the piece to be amended to reflect the above information and also to include our statement below.

A DVLA Spokesperson said:

“It is very disappointing that the PCS is insisting on pushing ahead with a second round of industrial action this week. The DVLA provides essential services for motorists and millions of people right across the UK, including the printing of vaccine letters. For PCS to take further industrial action now will cause unnecessary delays at a time when restrictions are significantly easing and the UK vaccination rollout programme is making such great progress, with nearly 60% of adults in Wales having been given a first dose of the vaccine.

“There are zero positive cases of COVID-19 across DVLA's workforce of more than 6,000.

“The safety of our staff is paramount and DVLA has ensured that it has followed Welsh government guidance at every single point throughout the pandemic having consistently worked with Public Health Wales, Environmental Health and Swansea Bay Health Board to introduce a wide range of safety measures.

“DVLA's online services will operate as normal during this period of strike action and we advise customers to use those wherever possible. Those posting paper applications to DVLA or trying to reach our Contact Centre are likely to experience delays.”

Best regards,

David



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