UK government intervenes against DVLA strike over COVID-19 safety as union isolates dispute

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The Department for Transport (DfT) and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) brought in a private contractor to break the strike by around 700 workers at DVLA offices in Swansea from June 22 to 24. Private contractor APS was used to supply agency staff to print 400,000 V11 forms for car tax.

This development shows how invested the Johnson government is in defeating the long -running dispute over demands for workplace safety against the spread of COVID-19. The Swansea office of the DVLA has experienced the largest number of Covid infections linked to a single employer or workplace in the UK. DVLA offices have been hit by strike action by members of the Public Commercial and Services union (PCS) since April over management plans to bring hundreds more staff back into the workplace.

In the face of this state-orchestrated assault, the PCS is isolating the dispute. It has refused to call for a broader mobilisation of its 200,000-strong membership against the trampling of workers' safety. The PCS has criticized the government for prolonging the dispute and for preventing an agreement between the union and DVLA management that it claims would end industrial action.

The strike at DVLA is the only industrial action over COVID-19 called by any trade union in the UK during the pandemic. Even after the national death toll has surpassed 152,000—one of the highest per capita in the world—and with workplaces such as the DVLA turned into breeding grounds for Covid, the PCS is not challenging the Conservative government on its criminal record, merely that its actions threaten industrial peace.

PCS members at DVLA voted in March by 71.6 percent for strike action. They held four days of strikes in April and May, followed by two lots of strike action in June. The strikes were in response to management plans for a return to work in line with the government's May 17 reopening of the economy and abandonment of lockdown measures.

DVLA workers are not only confronting the plans of the agency but of the government itself. Hence the government's determination to defeat DVLA strikers to set a wider example that no quarter will be given. The government calculates that the Labour Party and PCS will block the response of the working class to their draconian actions.

In parliament last week, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps twice refused to answer questions about whether he had intervened to prevent an agreement being reached between the DVLA and PCS.

Tonia Antoniazzi, Labour MP for Gower, told the Commons that the agency and PCS had reached a deal some weeks before, which had then been "ideologically refused". Gower said, "In a development unprecedented in 20 years of civil service negotiations the department subsequently reneged on a deal, much of which they had written themselves, with no word of explanation."

Antoniazzi asked, "Are PCS right in believing the deal was scuppered at the last minute after the direct intervention of the Secretary of State?" Rather than answering the question, Shapps launched into an account of how much the government had spent on safety at the facility in Swansea, accusing the union of switching to demands about money rather than Covid protection.

PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka accused the minister of "cowardice", and urged the original agreement be put "back on the table". Serwotka said, "His attempt to shift the blame on to the hard-working staff at the DVLA for the current impasse is consistent with a minister who lacks the courage to admit what he has done."

Shapps, the PCS and Labour have showed more urgency in ending the dispute than they have in safeguarding workers against the spread of the virus. Antoniazzi and Serwotka's intervention denies the incompatibility of the interests of the working class with the government's herd immunity agenda which has placed the interests of the economy and the profits

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of the corporations before the protection of life—a policy the *British Medical Journal* described as "social murder".

The situation at DVLA offices testifies to this, with the virus allowed to run rampant. From 11 cases recorded at the agency between March and September 2020, some 535 workers caught the disease between September and the start of January across DVLA offices in the city. After staff were drafted back after the first lockdown was ended, numbers on site grew from 400 to 2,300. According to Public Health England, the total number of infections over the six-month period was 560, including one fatality.

The government's intervention to undermine the proposed deal should not be cause for any illusions in the PCS and the deal it is attempting to reach. The union wants to resume its partnership with management which has shown nothing but contempt for workers safety. DVLA CEO Julie Lennard reported she had only visited the offices six or seven times since September, claiming she didn't wish to be an infection risk. Louise White, HR and estates director, had not appeared onsite since October, although her team was required to be physically present.

The much-vaunted deal the PCS and Labour Party complain was withdrawn at the last minute offered little in terms of addressing workers' concerns. It was taken off the table at the last minute on June 1 and was largely drafted by the agency itself.

According to the PCS it proposed to allow staff currently working remotely to continue but did not address the grievance of many office workers who have been denied the same opportunity. For those currently working at DVLA's offices their attendance would be reduced by just half a day per week, but this was framed within the context of increasing overall numbers onsite. It also included a derisory one-off "recognition" payment of £200 to all staff including those working from home or on paid special leave, and a proposed flex-credit award of two days to staff required to work in the office throughout the pandemic.

Serwotka said, "We strongly suspect senior ministers at the DfT have interfered with the progress we were making and want to make some kind of ideological stand against PCS… They have grossly underestimated the resolve of our members. PCS is fully prepared for months of strike action."

There is no question mark over DVLA workers' resolve. But the PCS is undermining this as it continues to isolate the dispute. It is limiting strike action on a departmental basis consisting largely of one-day stoppages with a three-day stoppage to start from July 12. Strikers are receiving a pitiful £40 a day hardship payment from the PCS.

The PCS resumed talks with the DVLA following the strike-breaking operations on June 28 and is continuing to try and whittle down opposition. In the meantime, management's plans continue unabated. This is underlined in the union's latest press release where it trumpets as an achievement that management have agreed to restore desk isolation following suspected or positive cases to 72 hours rather than 24 hours.

The union admits that the agency is ignoring a rise in cases of COVID-19 in the Swansea Bay area as it demands staff return to the offices from remote working. DVLA staff are expected to work at shared desks, a sure sign that the workplace has already become overcrowded. The PCS met with management the day before the largest phased return-to-work so far of 150 plus workers and it plans for an additional 100 staff to be employed on fixed term contracts. This is in addition to an extra 500 staff who have been brought back in June.

The Tory government's ruthless strike-breaking operation is reliant on the PCS to dissipate opposition to the unsafe return to work. The trade unions are preventing any broader mobilisation against the abandonment of lockdown measures. Last month, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) published findings from a survey which showed that 1 in 10 workers had been put under pressure to return to their workplace—1 in 6 of disabled workers—and that 1 in 4 were working from an office or workplace despite being able to work from home.

Johnson's willingness to let the "bodies pile high in their thousands" is official government policy. DVLA workers need to organise rank-and-file committees to win support throughout the working class for a unified struggle to defend, safety and livelihoods during the pandemic against the government and its accomplices in the Labour Party and trade unions.

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