

Military on standby ahead of UK lorry drivers' strike

Harvey Thompson, Laura Tiernan
13 August 2021

The British Army has been placed on standby ahead of a national lorry drivers' strike due to take place August 23. Soldiers are being readied on the pretext of dealing with a threatened breakdown in UK supply chains due to Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and an unprecedented shortage of long-haul lorry drivers.

Army personnel with Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) license qualifications "are being put on [a] five-day stand-by notice for driving jobs at major distribution centres around the country," according to a report in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun on Sunday*.

"Soldiers will be put up in hotels where necessary and will be working extended hours to assist with the crisis. They will be involved with food distribution as well as the transportation of other essential goods and medical supplies," the *Sun* reported.

Unnamed military sources were cited after news broke of a national stay-at-home strike being organised by rank-and-file lorry drivers. According to reports in the *Sun*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, the military's involvement would come under pandemic response legislation enacted by Boris Johnson's Conservative government as part of Operation Rescript. This was described by the Ministry of Defence as the UK's "biggest ever homeland military operation in peacetime", involving up to 23,000 personnel within a specialist task force, named the COVID Support Force (CSF).

The significance of the military's involvement goes well beyond its stated purpose of maintaining "essential goods and medical supplies". It is a clear threat to growing industrial unrest and points to state preparations for a direct confrontation with the working class.

Lorry drivers are planning a one-day strike to protest lengthening working hours, low pay, intolerable conditions and the consequences of a recruitment and retention crisis that has resulted in a shortage of 100,000 drivers across the UK.

The strike call was started by the HGV Drivers on Strike Facebook group, formed in March and since renamed Professional Drivers Protest Group, UK. More than 3,000 drivers have reportedly signed up for the "stay at home" strike day.

The group's mission statement is to "unite professional drivers across the United Kingdom, all of you, who would like to see some changes in their profession" including an end to "low wages, long hours, general disrespect and disregard to needs of drivers, including being denied access to toilet facilities etc., no family or social life, more and more rules and expectations, increased responsibility and finally—massive exploitation. All this with wages going down."

It continued, "We are the backbone of the economy. The spine and the blood. Without transport, any country would be on its knees within a few days. There is a power in that. We should unite and stand together to try to change things. Let's start with forming a petition to

the government, stating our demands. If they won't be met, then a protest should start. With 100,000 drivers short at the moment, there has never been a better time."

The lorry drivers have drafted a list of demands, including a £15 per hour minimum wage, a 45-hour working week, time-and-a-half for overtime and double-time for Sunday work, and a penalty charge for companies that refuse drivers the use of toilet facilities. They call for "employment rather than self-employment", noting "if an agency can charge their customers up to £30/hour, they shouldn't be allowed to pay drivers £11."

Drivers have taken to Facebook to vent their anger over these conditions and to correct the mainstream media's narrative surrounding the lorry driver shortage.

As one HGV driver explained, "There is no shortage of drivers. There is a shortage of cheap drivers. There are 3.7 million drivers in the UK who will not do HGV because of the long hours, poor wages and lifestyle..."

"The industry doesn't give a toss about its drivers, only keeping the costs as low as possible by exploiting drivers from poorer areas of the EU. Now this option is gone, suddenly there's a crisis."

Another driver wrote, "Everyone treats you like nobody, and nobody gives a damn about you. Same wages as 15 years ago; Companies push drivers to work abnormal load; 24h a day; Shift 13–15 hours; Travel to work and home 1.5h... then only 5h left for sleep... It is a joke and not a job... Few more months and I'm leaving this industry so you can count 1 more driver."

Other drivers agreed, "DVLA have confirmed in a government enquiry there are more than enough LGV [Large Goods Vehicle] licence holders to meet demand. What there is is a lack of drivers willing to leave home at 4am Monday morning, be out all week putting in 60–70hrs getting home late Friday night doing one of the 10 most dangerous jobs in the country just to earn the same money as the median UK wage for a 37hr week. Some companies in my area advertising for drivers are still advertising an hourly rate I was earning in 2008. And then they wonder why they can't find drivers."

The last national lorry drivers' strike took place on January 3, 1979, during the "Winter of Discontent", when more than 1.7 million workers took strike action against James Callaghan's Labour government's imposition of wage restraint policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Callaghan had readied the army for use against the lorry drivers' strike, but drivers won pay increases of up to 20 percent.

Labour's betrayals, backed by the trade union leaders, paved the way for the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, beginning a process of deregulation by successive

Labour and Tory governments that has resulted in brutal and degrading conditions for drivers. The success of this offensive rested on the collusion of the transport unions, which suppressed industrial action over four decades. Today, of 320,000 HGV drivers currently working, only about 15 percent are unionised.

A warning must be sounded over the role being played by today's pro-company trade unions. Last month, after the Johnson government announced a dangerous extension of working hours to ten hours per day, the unions rubber stamped the move. Unite merely issued a mealy-mouthed statement that the government's brutal measure would "not resolve" the shortage of HGV drivers, adding, "Unite will be advising its members to not place themselves in danger and that if they are too tired to drive safely they have a legal right to refuse to do so." Unite proposed no collective action, merely promising it would "fully support" any individual who refused to work the longer shifts.

With drivers' anger reaching boiling point, Unite has announced disputes at logistics firm GXO and Booker Retail Partners. At GXO, around 1,000 drivers at 26 UK sites are due to strike for 24 hours on August 24, followed by a second walkout on September 2. The strike vote saw 97 percent of drivers reject the company's miserly offer of a 1.4 percent pay rise for 2021. GXO supplies 40 percent of the UK hospitality industry's beer.

Lorry drivers at Booker Retail Partners, a wholesale company delivering to around 1,500 convenience stores in London and the southeast, are to be balloted for industrial action over the last two weeks of August. The ballot only covers the 30 Unite members at Booker's Thameside depot, who are demanding the same £5 an hour temporary pay increase given to the company's Hemel Hempstead drivers in response to the nationwide shortage of drivers.

The union is seizing on the driver shortage and threat of wildcat industrial action to position itself as a peacemaker and partner to the Johnson government and the transport companies. It has submitted a six-point plan to Transport Minister Grant Shapps, the centrepiece of which is the call for a "national council to determine industry standards" that would "vastly reduce the ability of rogue employers to undercut rates at the cost of drivers' safety, pay and conditions."

Unite's attempt to reduce the problem to a few bad apples is belied by the reality of brutal exploitation across the industry.

This pitch to the Tories mirrors efforts by Unite, the RMT and ASLEF in joining the Johnson government's Rail Industry Recovery Group, collaborating with railway company executives to drive through cuts, with plans to axe thousands of jobs, gut pensions and introduce full "labour force flexibility".

The planned lorry strike takes place amid the biggest crisis in global supply chains since the Second World War, triggered by the pandemic and Brexit. The owner of one of Britain's largest food producers, 2 Sisters, warned last month that the government must act or face the "most serious food shortages that this country has seen in over 75 years". The situation will reach crisis point after new Brexit border checks on animal and plant products entering the UK take effect on October 1.

Workers are seizing on a crisis created by the ruling class to fight for long-suppressed demands as part of a resurgence of class struggle internationally. Lorry driver Mark Schubert told the *Guardian* last month that in nearly 40 years he had never seen such desire for change: "For far too many years we have been ignored, exploited and taken for granted. Now our time has come, now we have a window of opportunity to be listened to."

Significantly, Schubert condemned the British government's

treatment of foreign workers. Lorry drivers from Poland, Romania and other Eastern European countries have long been used as cheap labour by transport companies in the UK and western Europe. At least 25,000 HGV drivers are thought to have left the UK because of Brexit. "Looking at the way [home secretary] Priti Patel and her cohorts in the Home Office treat foreigners, they're not going to be overly keen on coming back," Schubert told the *Guardian*. "Even if they can, are they going to be treated like criminals when they arrive at the border?"

Over the past 40 years, lorry drivers have become part of a globally integrated workforce, shattering national insularity and parochialism. Last December's lorry queues at Dover, sparked by tensions between Britain and France over Brexit, exposed the brutal conditions facing drivers of all nationalities. The drivers were left for days without food, water or toilet facilities. Such conditions showed the indifference of transport companies and capitalist governments on both sides of the English Channel to the rights and dignity of workers whose labour is essential to everyday life for millions of people.

The planned stay-at-home strike on August 23 deserves the support of working people everywhere. The precondition for its success is complete independence from the pro-company trade unions and an appeal for a unified struggle of workers in transport, logistics and aviation across Britain, Europe and internationally. The pandemic, the national antagonisms within Europe leading to Brexit, and the explosive growth of social inequality are global problems that require a global solution.

The Johnson government's plans to mobilise the military against striking lorry drivers goes hand in hand with trade war measures against Europe and Asia, stepped-up border protection measures against refugees and immigrants, and the growing threat of militarism and war. Such authoritarian measures are born of the central contradiction of the capitalist system: between the world market and its division into rival nation states each defending the wealth and power of a tiny financial oligarchy.

A globally coordinated plan to end the pandemic and organise economic and social life in the interests of the world's population means forging the unity of the international working class in the fight for socialism.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact