

UK lorry drivers join stay-at-home protest: “We’re in the 21st century: this is not acceptable!”

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Hundreds of lorry drivers took part in a nationwide stay-at-home yesterday to fight for improved pay and conditions amid a shortage of drivers caused by decades of rampant exploitation.

The protest was organised by rank-and-file drivers on the Professional Drivers Facebook Group established in March. The group’s membership has grown to more than 4,000 drivers, with hundreds in the UK and internationally posting messages in support of the action.

“Drivers have been campaigning for better pay and conditions for years and years,” wrote one driver, “all ignored by Unite [the union], all ignored by the political representatives and completely ignored by the business owners”.

Other drivers expressed anger over the union’s posturing since news of the unofficial strike broke last month. Unite has organised various stunts including threats of limited industrial action and a “charter of rights”. Drivers have greeted these initiatives with contempt, with many pointing to Friday’s announcement by Unite that it had called off strikes at GXO on the basis of a sell-out pay deal.

Drivers are determined to win change. They are seizing on a shortage of long-haul drivers to advance long-suppressed demands for improved pay, reduced hours and the introduction of proper toilet and rest facilities on the road, along with professionalised training for new drivers.

There is a shortfall of 100,000 Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers according to the Road Haulage Association. The shortage has been exacerbated by Brexit, with an estimated 25,000 lorry drivers returning to Europe since 2016. In addition, the DVSA cancelled 30,000 HGV license tests last year due to the pandemic.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke yesterday with one of the organisers of the stay-at-home. “James” (his name has been changed to protect against victimisation) was a combat medic in the Royal Army Medical Corps and became a lorry driver in 2018 after working in sales. He is the co-author of a charter of lorry drivers’ rights published on the Facebook group.

The drivers are planning a second stay-at-home protest on November 5 to coincide with Guy Fawkes Day and are hoping momentum will build.

In his interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, James explained some of the background to yesterday’s action. He urged the WSWs to speak to other drivers involved in the protest to gain a fuller picture of the views and experiences of lorry drivers. We urge drivers in the UK, Europe and internationally to send reports about the conditions they are facing.

James: You might want to know why I became involved in this action. When you’re in a sales position, going out with a product people want, as I once was, the companies cannot do enough for you. You’ll go to a nice meeting room and get cups of coffee, tea and cake, you’ll do your presentation and people are treated with decency and respect.

When I started driving, I was turning up to places with significant value

loads and was having to ask for the toilets like I was back at school. And it would be “You can go and use that out hut over there,” which is absolutely disgusting.

When you’re out on the road, you’re required by law to stop either on working time directive—a half-hour break every six hours—or a driving time directive that says you have to take a 45-minute break if you’ve done four-and-a-half hours of driving. Can you imagine being stuck on the side of a major A road, in a so-called lay-by or rest area? You get buffeted around, you can’t get out of the truck, there’s nowhere to go. You can’t rest. There are no facilities, no toilet, no washroom.

There’s growing numbers of women drivers now. Where are they supposed to go? You can’t just have everyone squatting down in the trees or urinating on the side of a wheel on a busy road. We’re in the 21st century—this is not acceptable!

And if you have to go into a city, there’s nowhere to stop and rest. It’s ludicrous the way the transport companies expect drivers to push on and on, because they’re making promises to deliver goods when they have no idea what is actually required by the driver. So many people hold managerial positions in transport who have never got behind the wheel of a truck in their lives. They have no idea what it means to take a 45-foot trailer to the centre of a city.

Services are another example. You get a big, tarmacked area with no facilities and they want you to pay £30-£40 a night to go and use a shower that is in a public toilet. And the kind of food you can get at services, it’s either a McDonalds or a Burger King or a Greggs. I’m a vegetarian. It’s all very well saying “you can have a microwave” in the truck, but think of the guys who are out three, four, five days at a time.

And if you talk to other drivers, they’re getting their cab curtains slashed at night, or tyres slashed, or people are trying to steal the 200-300 litres of fuel in the truck because it’s not a secure area. That’s the risk you’re putting drivers in.

If you go to France or Germany, you’ve got service stations and dedicated rest areas. There’s a picnic table, a place you can get out and walk. There are toilets, places you can get some water. And they can socialise. It just doesn’t happen in the UK.

It takes a driver, easily, a year-and-a-half to get competent with a Class 1 truck, to put it into the kind of places these companies ask for, in city centres, in tight-tight roads in Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, the mountains of Wales. It takes a while! If you go where trucks are moving, you’ll see things bent out of shape and it is down to people who lack the experience and lack the knowledge of the vehicle they’re in. And rather than there being decent effective training by these companies, all they care about is getting the loads out. You don’t take electricians and say, ‘right here’s a screwdriver, into the house you go!’ I don’t think there’s any evidence the government is recording accidents involving new HGV drivers.

You have to professionalise the industry and that involves taking on drivers from an early age and giving them the time and the expertise that you would in any trade, putting them into a FE [Further Education] college and allowing them to learn everything that they need to learn. This could easily take two years and cover all aspects of industry requirements.

It's also about hours worked. If you look at the airline industry as an example, you wouldn't put a pilot constantly behind a plane and get them to work 15-hour days and then keep flying the plane for two weeks on end, would you? Yet the transport industry expects drivers to work up to two or three weeks in a vehicle, often stopping at dangerous locations with high-value loads, at risk of crime, along with poor sleep patterns for the driver.

The WSWs pointed out the stay-at-home protest had been organised by rank-and-file drivers and not the union.

James: And why would they? I've joined unions. In my view they exist to keep a few people at the top in a very luxurious lifestyle, while everyone at the bottom tries to unite and get things done fairly. I've just seen too many times the unions not doing anything for their members. Some may say you've got all this legal protection and shop stewards who will speak up on your behalf. But in my view, I don't think the unions work particularly well. They might have done in the past. But I see no evidence of unions taking positive action for people. They just capitulate.

Someone like [Unite leader] Len McCluskey has no idea what it is to be a worker. He doesn't speak for me. And many, many union people I've listened to don't speak for me. Rarely do they speak for the workforce. I'm not anti-union, but I'm not interested in individual action, I'm interested in collective action to change the industry for everyone.

Everyone wants to be able to move on and have a nice house and nice holidays. But you can't do it if you're downtrodden all the time. You try to get a plumber or an electrician for £15 pound an hour. Look at the responsibility that these young lads have on the roads in the UK and where people are asking these loads to go.

If you try to drive a truck where the more affluent live, I guarantee there will be a weight restriction on that road, or that village, to stop you going anywhere near it. You try to get to Bristol, to Shepton Mallet, and you have a look on the map at the weight restrictions that stop you moving all around there.

These people are the very same ones, bitching like crazy as to why there is no milk on the shelves, and why the vegetables aren't there, or why there is no beer getting to the pub so they can sit in the beer garden. All that is required here is that people just need to see that these things need to change. They can't continue to ignore them. The reason why these protests will work is because of the shortages. I hope people read the charter and I hope it resonates with them.

The WSWs asked James about the threats ahead of yesterday's action that the military would be used to move supplies. The *Sun on Sunday* had reported that HGV license holders in the military were being placed on standby in what was clearly aimed as a threat against drivers.

James: I am an ex-soldier. A soldier in my time was trained to drive a DAF truck, with a trailer on. It's a small off-road vehicle with a four-wheel drive. It's not an 18-wheel state of the art Volvo truck.

In the pandemic you would have seen pictures on the BBC of an army truck, loading up with NHS supplies. But the army doesn't have the capability to do what DHL or Royal Mail (as examples) can do. Using a forklift driver and a power pump truck, they can load a double-deck truck with less manpower than it takes eight soldiers. The load can be taken to a central distribution centre (CDC) or regional distribution centre (RDC), and the packages are scanned digitally, redistributed onto vans and get to their destination far more effectively and efficiently.

The problem with distribution in the first stage of the pandemic wasn't that the supply chain couldn't deal with it. It was that there wasn't

enough product to get out! The government was saying, as an example, 'We've flown a Royal Air Force C17 out to Turkey to get PPE supplies.' What? And DHL and Royal Mail haven't got aircraft capable of flying anywhere on the planet to collect medical equipment? They are just lying to the public. It was headline grabbing.

The military has nowhere near the logistic capability of civil industry. We're seeing an example of that right now on the TV—without American logistic support the whole military operation will collapse. A lot of people in the army will be trained to drive trucks, but can they? The difference between an army lorry and driving what is a state-of-the-art modern-day class 1 tractor unit and trailer are as night and day. Truck drivers are skilled people.

Why, given all the money that transport generates for the economy, aren't there better facilities for the people doing this? Why do they go and build all these nice hotels so that people can have these meetings from businesses in the centre of the cities; and forget about everyone who is moving everything *into* the cities?

All of these issues have come to a head because of the pandemic, and drivers probably feel more disenfranchised than normal. It's a general frustration and disappointment of how badly off people are, despite having done so much for the country. Nobody sees drivers because they are individuals, and there's a feeling of disappointment and frustration. Yes, nurses and doctors are getting clapped, but I don't feel that the drivers have been recognised for what they have done.

The Professional Drivers Facebook Group started with one driver, who got 500 other drivers really quickly. The August 23 action came about because we said, 'We've got to draw a line in the sand guys.' The group's grown to more than 4,000 members. Everything that you've got in your house, everything around you, has been delivered by a truck. I've had numerous people say [on the day of the strike], 'There's still trucks on the road'. But if you take every single 40-ft trailer, with 26 pallets on the back, and you take even 200 drivers off, that's 2,600 loads that aren't getting to where they need to go. That has an effect. Take a building site for example. If the guy delivering the concrete doesn't arrive to pour the concrete on top of the steel that was delivered the day before then they can't put in the support struts the following day and it throws out the building project.

I want to see the industry improved. The reason we wrote the charter is that those key issues affect everyone. If the numbers grow by November, they will have an effect.



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