

UK government crisis deepens as lorry driver shortage leaves fuel stations empty

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A fuel shortage has left drivers queuing for miles at garages nationwide in Britain, amid warnings of a devastating impact on industry and the already overwhelmed National Health Service (NHS).

Such scenes epitomise the post-Brexit crisis wracking the Britain's Conservative government. They come after weeks in which the public have been hit with shortages of basic items in supermarkets, with UK supply chains hit due to Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic, and an unprecedented shortage of long-haul lorry drivers.

The latest crisis was sparked by an announcement last week by BP, which operates 1,200 BP branded petrol stations nationwide, that it would be necessary to temporarily close a small number due to a lack of lorry drivers to supply them.

Long queues started to build up outside fuel stations, fearing that supplies would soon run out. On Friday forecourt petrol sales were already up 180 percent and by Sunday the Petrol Retailers Association said that between 50 and 85 percent of all independent service stations nationwide were empty. On Monday, most of the UK 8,000 petrol stations had been drained of fuel.

By Tuesday, Royal College of Nursing England director Patricia Marquis warned that some nursing staff had told management they would be unable to get to work this week because of queues for petrol and empty stations. The BBC reported that one junior doctor in London, "went to 17 petrol stations after work on Monday in search of fuel—but wasn't able to get any".

The *Guardian* reported Tuesday that it had "learned that several cancer patients due to attend appointments this week at University College hospital (UCLH), one of London's largest hospitals, have been told they will have to be rescheduled." A spokesperson for the

hospital said it was necessary due to complications with its non-emergency patient transport provision due to "the national fuel supply".

Despite reassurance by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government and after carrying out 18 measures to get the crisis under control, including placing military drivers on standby, drivers were still queuing for fuel.

On Sunday evening, as the crisis worsened, the government was forced to exempt the entire energy industry from the 1998 Competition Act in order that companies could legally share basic data and prioritise deliveries to areas where fuel was needed most.

This occurred as it was revealed that one of the UK's six oil refineries, which collectively supply about 85 percent of UK fuel demand, is threatened with imminent bankruptcy due to an unpaid tax bill. The Stanlow refinery in Ellesmere Port supplies about a sixth of Britain's road fuel. Run by two billionaire brothers, Ruia and Ravi Shashi, through their company Essar Oil UK, it is pleading poverty after taking advantage of one of the Johnson governments big business pandemic bailout measures. Under the Value Added Tax deferral scheme they were able to benefit to the tune of £356 million.

In an emergency meeting with Cabinet ministers and senior government officials Monday, Johnson requested the army be put on standby to fill fuel stations under a contingency plans known as Operation Escalin. It is unclear that this would do much to stem the crisis, given that the Ministry of Defence could only supply around 150 qualified army tanker drivers on short notice to deliver fuel (75 now and another 75 if needed), with another 150 military personnel on hand in a support role. Additional military forces, if they are available, require specialised training.

The Tory government, delirious on visions of a “Global Britain” bestriding the world and boasting that a substantial portion of its armed forces would be away from May for six months on its provocative mission to the South China Sea, has ignored for months the implications of the staggering shortage of HGV drivers in Britain. The UK is estimated to be short of more than 100,000 lorry drivers, meaning that much of basic industry and a supply network, much of it integrated into complex just in time production operations, has seized up.

The shortage has been exacerbated by Brexit, with an estimated 25,000 drivers returning to Europe since 2016. The pandemic has also intensified the crisis, with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) cancelling 30,000 HGV license tests last year.

The government is now offering “temporary” visas to 5,000 foreign fuel tanker and food lorry drivers, and with the profitable Christmas period of trading threatened with being massively disrupted, to 5,500 foreign-based poultry workers. It is also attempting to bring back around a million existing HGV drivers into the industry, under conditions in which many have left due to the intolerable working conditions and low pay for what is a highly skilled job. Plans were also announced to train 4,000 new HGV drivers under conditions in which there is now a backlog of 50,000 lorry drivers waiting to take their tests.

The government is not simply planning to enlist army personnel as truck drivers, but also to break a potential strike of DVSA test examiners who voted for industrial action last Friday in protest at DVSA plans to increase the number of tests from 2,000 a day pre-COVID to 4,000.

The pro-government *Daily Telegraph* cited a “road haulage industry insider” who said, “There has been talk of bringing in the Army to drive fuel tankers, but the simplest solution would be to deploy the Army to the DVLA to sort out the applications.”

The crisis of rule in a country which becomes more dysfunctional by the day is epitomised by the ever more frequent calls being made for the army, down to just 82,000 full-time personnel, to take over everything from building temporary field hospitals at the height of the pandemic last year, to currently helping run chronically under pressure ambulance services in Wales and Scotland. This was lampooned by the *Times* in a

cartoon Tuesday under the caption reading “Panic Governing” with Johnson at his desk, having no other solution, screaming out, “Bring In The Army!”

Social tensions are at breaking point and this can only be intensified with around a million workers being forced off the government-backed furlough scheme in a matter of days and going back into the labour market—threatening unrepresented social dislocation. This is at the same time as the £20 weekly uplift given during the pandemic to millions of Universal Credit welfare recipients, including many of the lowest paid workers, will also end.

The institutions of the capitalist class and media are not mincing their words as to the implications of the threatened catastrophe. Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey, in a speech to the Society of Professional Economists, made an analogy to the Biblical plague, asking, “When are the locusts due to arrive?”

Daily Mail City Editor Alex Brummer commented Tuesday, “We live in perilous times and Bailey, who is not heard that often, is sounding the alarm.”

The *Financial Times* was scathing of Johnson, using his own *franglais* insult directed against President Macron for complaining about the AUKUS military pact. Its editorial was headlined, “Memo to Boris Johnson: prenez un grip”. It noted, “First came gaps on supermarket shelves, then soaring energy bills. Now petrol stations are running out of fuel; the army is on standby to help out. Less than two weeks ago, Boris Johnson’s cabinet reshuffle was intended to be a relaunch for the post-Covid era. Instead, his team seems increasingly to be buffeted by events but not in control.”



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