

UK's petrol crisis highlights collapse of European road freight industry

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For the last week and a half, British petrol stations have been gridlocked by drivers seeking scarce supplies of fuel.

Petrol stations normally operate with their storage tank at 40 percent capacity and rely on “just in time” deliveries to replenish stocks. Two weeks ago, the ongoing shortages of HGV and fuel tanker drivers disrupted supply chains, leading to panic buying.

Between September 22 and 29, there was a 190 percent increase in the number of people driving to petrol stations, peaking at over 400 percent on September 25. Each customer bought 22 percent more fuel on average than normal.

At the height of the crisis on the weekend of September 25-26, average fuel capacity at petrol stations fell to 16.6 percent, with 50 to 90 percent running completely dry in different areas of the country. On September 28, national traffic fell to 86 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Healthcare staff and other key workers warned they would be unable to get to work.

Although stocks have begun to increase again, one fifth of stations in London and the South East are still without fuel, and 18 percent had only one grade available. In the rest of the country, 8 percent are empty and a further 6 percent have only one grade.

Shortages have contributed to a sharp rise in the price of fuel, with petrol at an eight-year high and closing in on a record. This has also been driven by a global increase in the cost of oil, up ten percent over September and is expected to climb further.

After first ignoring the problem for days, the government announced on September 25 that it would launch a temporary visa scheme asking 5,000 lorry drivers to come from Europe to work in the UK delivering fuel and food from the end of this month—until Christmas Eve when they would be thrown out again.

Popular uproar forced the extension of this scheme to the end of February. But whereas the government is

seeking to recruit around 300 drivers immediately, the *Times* and the Department for Business report that so far just 27 have applied. Prime Minister Boris Johnson claims the number is 127.

On September 30, Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab suggested using low-level offenders to plug the HGV shortage.

On October 4, the army was deployed to much fanfare to help with fuel supplies. Two hundred soldiers were made available, but only half have the skills necessary to drive tankers.

The fuel crisis has sparked a wave of well-deserved outrage against the government and its catastrophic Brexit policy. But the events of the last two weeks point to a broader crisis of the European economy.

According to think tank Transport Intelligence, the UK's shortage of roughly 76,000 lorry drivers (elsewhere estimated at 100,000) is part of a general shortage of some 400,000 drivers across Europe. Poland is the worst affected, with a shortage of 124,000, 37 percent of positions, though this is most likely the result of Polish drivers working in more prosperous European Union countries. In Germany, 45,000-60,000 are missing; in France, 43,000; in Spain and Italy, 15,000; in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, between 2,500 and 5,000.

Shortages have been affecting the road freight sector for 15 years and have been aggravated by the pandemic and the recent reopening of the economy driving up demand. This pan-European breakdown in such a vital economic sector is the result of decades of private profiteering and deregulation which have eroded logistics workers' pay and conditions.

There are over half a million people with HGV licenses in the UK, but well over 200,000 of them are choosing not to take up vacancies. A survey of over 600 industry figures in the UK by the Road Haulage Association found that retirement, changing working rules, the pandemic,

low pay, (not to mention appalling working conditions) and drivers leaving the industry were some of the main reasons for the lack of workers.

The average age of a UK lorry driver has climbed to 55—less than 1 percent are younger than 25. From 7,500 retirements a year in 2010, the sector went to 10,000 a year in 2020, or 4 percent of the workforce. The total number of people employed as drivers fell 7 percent between 2019 and 2020.

The same process has been at work in Europe. *Politico* reported EU advocacy director at the International Road Transport Organisation, Raluca Marian warning that it was “easy to calculate an apocalyptic scenario” for the EU, based on events in the UK. In Europe, the average age of a driver is 44.

The crisis is more acute in Britain in part because of Brexit. Somewhere between 10,000-20,000 EU drivers left the UK after it withdrew from the union. Brexit-related delays at ports and disruption to import-export routes have also played a role, exacerbating the longstanding export imbalance between the UK and Europe which requires many lorries to return from Britain empty and making the routes relatively less desirable for businesses.

But the dominant factor is the UK’s more rapid destruction of workers’ protections and wholesale embrace of the free market since the Thatcher government came to power in 1979. UK hauliers have so thoroughly gutted the conditions of their workers, including by hyper-exploiting cheap, predominantly Eastern, European labour, that UK-based workers have left the industry in droves.

Over 55,000 domestic drivers left the industry in just the last 18 months. The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the especially appalling conditions these workers have confronted throughout the pandemic, and on strike action organised by rank-and-file drivers this August. Richard Simpson, former editor of *Trucking Magazine*, wrote in the *Guardian*, “Why would they want to return to the job? Facilities are poor, the hours brutal and the responsibilities onerous. And these are only going to get worse.”

Fundamentally the same causes lie behind shortages of agricultural workers, abattoir workers, construction workers, care home staff and nurses, among others. Basic socio-economic infrastructure has been run down under the rule of a super-rich oligarchy whose only concern is the debt and speculation fuelled expansion of their stock market portfolios, with scant regard paid to the

maintenance of even the most basic industries and social infrastructure, let alone the development of a skilled and adequately paid workforce.

Even senior Tory politicians have, anonymously, blamed the current crisis on “a failure of the free market” and accused UK businesses of being “drunk on cheap labour”, according to the *Telegraph*.

The deployment of the armed forces to an increasing range of basic social tasks—5,000 to aid with testing, vaccination and medical care during the pandemic, and now roughly a hundred each to help the Scottish ambulance service and the fuel tanker sector—is the most striking confirmation of British capitalism’s ongoing collapse.

Not only can the free market not provide the necessary workers, but the state also has no resources to mobilise except its armed forces, and even these can barely muster a few hundred people with the required skills.

No amount of social hardship will prompt the oligarchs or their representatives to change course, whether under Johnson or the far-distant prospect of a Labour government. Their solution is the stepped-up exploitation of the working class and a reflexive turn towards authoritarian measures. The use of the army will inevitably lead to demands for stepped up recruitment to plug gaping holes in the economy. But these forces will then be employed to break workers’ resistance to poverty wages and sweatshop conditions.

For the working class, the only way out of this crisis is to utilise its immense social power as the engine of the European and world economy to seize control of society from the super-rich. Production must be organised not on the basis of anarchic, cut-throat competition for private profit, but rational, democratic planning to fulfil social needs.



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