

UK HGV drivers' health and lives endangered by “epidemic” levels of fatigue

Harvey Thompson
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An inquest concluded earlier this month into the death of 31-year-old DHL-employed HGV delivery driver, Arron Middleton.

He was nearing the end of his shift and returning to the depot near East Midlands Airport on January 12. The coroner concluded that fatigue was the likely cause of the crash. It is believed that Middleton fell asleep at the wheel before he drove into the back of stationary traffic on the A50 in Derbyshire. He died at the scene from his injuries.

Middleton's death and the conclusion of the Derby Coroner's Court inquest highlight the serious dangers posed to HGV drivers by overwork and poor work conditions.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, HGV driver James, one of the organisers of a national stay-at-home strike last August and co-author of a charter of lorry drivers' rights, explained, “If you come all the way from Russia, Lithuania, those guys are going to be dead on their feet. The others doing maximum hours and no proper rest periods are also going to be tired.

“I say to people: just try it! Trying to take a 45ft trailer over the mountains, over crap roads, in the driving rain, for horrendous pay...

“Then there are the terrible facilities that drivers have to put up with. I know someone, who after an accident, had to stop overnight with just a tractor unit and heater. No bed, no shower, no nothing.”

Overwork, fatigue and abysmal facilities were all at play in the crash last month involving 24-year-old, heavily pregnant Sarah-Louise Murray, after she fell asleep at the wheel while driving overnight for more than 10 hours from Scotland to Somerset. She had been trying to get to a service station with, in the words of her defence solicitor, facilities that were more “salubrious for female drivers.”

According to a survey by the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETWF) in June, almost one in three

lorry drivers said they had fallen asleep at the wheel in the last year. The survey found that 60 percent of HGV drivers said they had to drive while fatigued on a regular basis, while 52 percent reported wanting to pull over and take a break but being unable to do so. The ETWF warned that professional driver fatigue was at “epidemic” levels.

The survey questioned 2,861 truck, bus and coach drivers from 28 European countries, with most responses from HGV drivers coming from the UK, as well as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. The ETWF said 772 drivers admitted that they had nearly crashed and caused a major road accident due to driver fatigue. The major contributing factors cited were long hours, low wages, unpredictable working patterns, lack of adequate sleep and poor rest facilities.

A Driver Fatigue factsheet issued in July 2020 by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) said that while it wasn't possible to calculate the exact number of sleep-related accidents on the roads, research shows that driver fatigue may be a contributory factor in up to a fifth of road accidents, and as much as 25 percent of fatal and serious accidents, and that “these types of crashes are about 50% more likely to result in death or serious injury as they tend to be high speed impacts because a driver who has fallen asleep cannot brake or swerve to avoid or reduce the impact.”

The RoSPA highlighted the prevalence of sleep disorders in the industry, citing one study of over 900 Italian truck drivers which found 43 percent were at risk of obstructive sleep apnoea (constriction of the throat during sleep, disrupting breathing) due to the largely sedentary nature of the work, before concluding that truck companies “should conduct compulsory examinations to detect sleep disorders, as the risk to truck drivers is inherently higher than that of the general population.”

Long-distance lorry driving is one of the most dangerous areas of work. The average long-haul vehicle

weighs in at 44 tonnes with 6 axles. Over 4,000 goods vehicle drivers or passengers were reported hurt in a road accident in 2020, 674 of them injured seriously and 54 killed.

Although drivers are clearly at their places of work when these often fatal accidents occur, they are not deemed workplace incidents and are investigated instead as road traffic accidents. All the issues that will have contributed to the accident—long driving hours, working conditions and other work-related factors—are air-brushed from any report.

In this already dangerous situation, the government has significantly weakened safety restrictions protecting HGV drivers and other road users in response to a labour shortage created by decades of declining pay and conditions, putting lives further at risk.

Between July 12 and October 31, the 10 hours' driving time a day limit was extended to 11 hours, and the stipulation limiting driving to no more than 90 hours over two weeks was upped to 99 hours. These “temporary” relaxations were extended from November 1 to January 9, 2022.

In many cases, the government has given the green light to companies already ignoring driving directives and pressuring drivers to disconnect their tachographs—the onboard device that records a vehicles' speed and distance.

Asked if drivers were under pressure to work beyond safe limits, James said, “Absolutely. It depends on the company and relationship you have with the transport manager.

“The pressure not just on HGV drivers, but on carriers, and anyone involved in the transport and delivery network. I've often come to pick up a [delivery] pallet and it may not be ready or there just isn't the safe space to transport it. Then everyone is being forced into ignoring traffic regulations to get the job done.”

Changes have also been made by the government to the tests needed to obtain HGV licenses. The RoSPA described itself as “deeply disappointed” by the decision which it believed would “have a detrimental impact on road safety.”

James commented, “These licenses are put in place to educate new drivers, to help prevent accidents and so on... What you also really have to learn is the weight. It varies, but you could be carrying anything from 18 tonnes to in excess of 40 tonnes. You've got stone, water, fuel (a mobile bomb effectively) and nuclear fuel being transported. These are enormous weights. The

responsibility is huge.

“Why does the government think you need all this training to fly a plane or drive a train but anyone can drive a lorry? Why do they think drivers should be less competent? They just want to fill up the jobs.”

The government's ripping up of safety guidelines exposes the Unite union's fraudulent campaign calling for an improvement in HGV drivers' conditions. Launched in October following independent protests, the initiative was designed to cover for the unions' record in allowing pay and conditions to deteriorate so sharply and regain control of a restive workforce. Unite produced a threadbare drivers' manifesto as a pitch to form a corporatist relationship with the employers through which they could restrain workers' demands.

The sole product of the campaign was a tokenistic “take a break” stoppage, encouraging drivers to take their statutory 1-hour rest break at 11 a.m. on November 1.

Despite the union warning that the government's actions in the sector are “dangerous, reckless and potentially illegal” and “will increase pressures on drivers and threaten public safety on UK roads”, nothing has been done since. Unite has form on this issue, using the pandemic to get a planned dispute over “chronic fatigue” among London bus drivers off the table early last year.

To wage a genuine fight for their interests against the operators and the government, HGV drivers must form rank-and-file committees independent of the pro-company unions, organising with other workers throughout and beyond the sector and joining a global resurgence of working-class struggle.



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