

# UK HGV drivers respond to WSWs coverage of working conditions

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently published an article on the dangerously unsafe conditions under which Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers are being forced to work.

Among several factors contributing to unprecedented levels of fatigue among drivers, the article drew attention to the government's relaxation of the stipulations limiting driving time. These "temporary" relaxations have since been extended again, further threatening the health and lives of drivers and other road users.

Several drivers responded positively to the WSWs article on Facebook.

One said, "That report gives you almost everything you need to know why drivers leave the industry in such large numbers."

Another commented on the fact, highlighted in the article, that often fatal accidents involving HGV drivers are not viewed as workplace incidents and are investigated instead as road traffic accidents, thereby airbrushing out any contributory factors, such as long driving hours and working conditions. He wrote, "Got to love that loophole get out of jail free card for them, they're not regarded as 'workplace accidents' but road traffic accidents".

Others raised various work-related health concerns suffered by drivers, from bowel and kidney problems to deep vein thrombosis. Studies have shown that lorry drivers are more likely than average to suffer heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, sleeping problems and musculoskeletal disorders.

Two experienced drivers, Gary and Stuart, agreed to give more extensive comments to the WSWs.

Since leaving school, **Gary** had been employed in a number of different jobs including working as a care assistant, as well as for Royal Mail for 12 years. He

applied for and gained his HGV driver's license, class one, as "a fall back".

In the 33 years he's been a lorry driver, Gary has been employed by 20 to 30 different haulage companies. "It's virtually the same pay you get now as when I started in 1989. Conditions haven't improved either.

"So, in 1989, I got £25 to stop overnight, or what's called 'tramping', and it's the same that you get now—£25! Meanwhile, everything has gone up [in price], even in the last 3 or 4 months."

Speaking about the impact on the workforce of stagnant pay and worsening conditions, Gary said, "There isn't an actual shortage of qualified lorry drivers in this country. There is a shortage of workers prepared to put up with the pay, conditions and abuse that they're expected to put up with."

Classed as key workers by the government, HGV drivers were expected to work throughout the pandemic, even as roadside food and toilet facilities shut during lockdown. For drivers like Gary, who suffer lung-related health issues and are exempt from wearing face coverings, the difficulties around accessing facilities increased further. Often, he would not be allowed access to canteens or toilets. The nondescript government-issued medical exemption certificate was routinely not recognised.

Gary told our reporter about driving hours, "Every job that I've been for has said it was for 40 hours a week. But none of the jobs has actually been 40 hours. It's more like 60 hours for an average week."

"This country could be brought to a standstill just by drivers working to the rule," he added.

"So, if you consider that the average school pupil can concentrate for an hour and an HGV driver who has 40 tons behind him is expected to concentrate for four

hours on increasingly busy roads—it just leads to mental fatigue. You realise you’re a few junctions along and you think ‘how did I get here?’ Your mind is just elsewhere.”

Speaking about occupational health concerns, Gary explained how he went to the doctors last year with a swollen leg thinking it was cramp.

“But the doctor diagnosed it as deep vein thrombosis. So, I said ‘How can it be that? I’ve not flown for 10 years’, and he asked me what I did for a living. When I told him, he said ‘think about it, you’re driving for 9 to 10 straight hours; that there is the equivalent of a flight to New York. Your right leg may be OK as you will use the break and the throttle, but your left leg sits there in a bent position all day cutting off the circulation.’

“He actually said you’re not the first truck driver I’ve had through the door with this.”

Gary was recently dismissed from his job for refusing to answer the phone while driving (illegal under UK law). “I’ve complained for the past 18 months that there is no hands-free phone in any of the wagons. I suggested that if I’m called on route, then I will stop at the first available place and call back.”

He explained that “one of the people trying to contact me on my last shift had been previously charged by the police for using a phone while driving!”

The haulage company, aware of its own precarious position, dismissed Gary not for the ‘offence’ of refusing to carry out a hazardous activity but by claiming the work had suddenly dried up.

Gary spoke about the original WSWs article he had read on HGV driver fatigue:

“It just came up on my Facebook and I started reading it as it was about the death of the driver Aaron Middleton. I read it through to the end. Often you start to read something and you don’t get through to the end but something about the article rang true, about the drivers’ conditions, it seemed that someone somewhere was listening, and I thought about this. Unfortunately, our employers aren’t listening.”

He added, “For a company, the driver is just a commodity or might just as well be a pallet truck.”

HGV driver **Stuart** told the WSWs, “From practical experience, going into the current 10-hour drive limit up to twice a week is a long time to concentrate when driving a lorry. Extending that to up to four times a week is asking for trouble.

“Most drivers are not just moving a trailer from A to B. A 10 or 11-hour drive may mean under a 12-hour day, but most of us will be loading/unloading multiple times in addition to the driving making it up to a 15-hour day.

“This is an accident waiting to happen. We have seen this from recent crashes and instances of many cases of tired drivers.

“We would be better served by a reduction in driving hours to say 40 hours per week or max 80 hours per fortnight to allow for some flexibility... and at the same time reduce the maximum working day from 15 to 13 hours with drivers having to take a minimum 11 hours off from the end of one day to the start of the next.”

On the driver shortage crisis, Stuart said, “The main reasons for the ‘driver shortage’ are: IR35, COVID, travel/isolation, poor conditions for drivers in UK—lack of rest areas, secure parking, hygiene facilities and low pay.

“IR35 [tax legislation] enforcement came in from April 6, 2021, and driver shortages were in the press by May/June. Large companies, especially supermarkets, had recruited directly from EU countries, setting drivers up as Ltd companies on zero-hour contracts avoiding employers’ National Insurance, pensions, holiday/sick pay etc. With IR35 enforcement, the companies would become liable for assessed unpaid taxes, so they shut down used of Ltd Co drivers.”

“European Union drivers who travelled home during COVID were not prepared to isolate before going back to work so took jobs in mainland EU.

“Facilities... need I say more, treated like dirt and companies refuse access to toilets or washing facilities which is against HSE [Health and Safety Executive] law in the UK. But, due to COVID, HSE inspectors were not visiting sites.”

**The WSWs invites other HGV drivers to contact us with their experiences.**



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