

Communication Workers Union whitewashes Royal Mail health and safety violations at Warrington “Super Hub”

Tony Robson
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Do you have information to report about health and safety breaches at the new Super Hubs or other Royal Mail facilities? Please submit using the form below. Your identity will be protected.

Royal Mail has flouted its basic statutory duties under Health and Safety laws at its parcels “Super Hub” in Warrington in north-west England. These are the findings of Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspectors who visited the site on May 23. They have been reported belatedly this week by the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

The Warrington Super Hub, located between Liverpool and Manchester, was opened in June 2020. It occupies 32,000 square metres--the size of four and a half football pitches. Employing 600 workers, it operates around the clock based on automated scanning, sorting and tracking technology with the aim of processing 800,000 parcels per day.

Opening the site, CEO Simon Thompson declared, “Royal Mail is now a parcels business that also delivers letters. Our new parcels Super Hub will allow us to give consumers exactly what they want – being able to order products very late in the day to have them delivered the very next day, seven days a week.

“This is a giant step forward in our journey to 90 percent parcel automation by the end of next year.”

The Super Hub’s promotion as a flagship for Royal Mail’s “modernisation” agenda makes the HSE inspectors’ findings even more damning. Prior to the HSE visit, Royal Mail had not conducted a single safety audit at its “state of the art” facility.

Despite systemic failures recorded by the HSE, the government agency merely served Royal Mail with a “Notification of Improvement”. This is the lowest level action which can be taken by the HSE.

What the HSE found

The HSE’s Notification of Contravention was reported by

CWU National Health and Safety & Environment Officer Dave Joyce in a letter to branches on July 3.

The CWU’s summary shows a litany of contraventions which have exposed workers to hazardous conditions including a lack of proper physical barriers to separate pedestrians from vehicles, inadequate equipment for working at height, failure to maintain a regime of pre-operational checks on machine safety features and on isolation procedures in the event of removing blockages.

Super Hub workers have been exposed to risks from being crushed by moving plant equipment, falls from height and entanglement in machinery.

The findings point to a deliberate flouting of safety procedures to boost productivity. “Lock off, tag off” (LOTO) procedures “used to ensure that dangerous equipment cannot be accessed whilst in operation” were systematically breached. LOTO protocols designed to ensure that dangerous machinery can be started and operated only by authorised staff were being overridden on the York Tipper Robot Cell:

“Operators confirmed the removal of parcels from the York Tipper Robot Cells had previously been undertaken by members of the Engineering Team only. However, due to the frequency of the activity they were unable to attend every event. As a result, operators were designated ‘technicians’ and provided with training in LOTO as part of the SSoW [Safe Systems of Work].”

Worst of all, “No management/monitoring of health and safety and no formal health and safety audits had been undertaken by the site management team or members of the corporate RMG SHE team despite the site being operational since June 2022.”

HSE inspectors also found “No suitable arrangements to monitor compliance with health and safety legislation” for the hub’s 600 workers.

The letter cites a raft of laws contravened by Royal Mail, including: Breach of Regulation 17 of The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992; Breach of Regulations 4 and 7 of The Work at Height Regulations 2005; Regulation 5(1) of the Management of Health and Safety at Work

Regulations 1999; Section 2 and 3 of the Health and Safety at Work Act.

It further reports the company's institutionalised disregard for rudimentary safety: "Operational Shift Managers/Supervisors, involved in day-to-day management of health and safety were found to be (a) not competent (b) do not have the full support from key decision makers and (c) are not afforded the appropriate amount of time to carry out their health and safety functions effectively."

Inside the super hub, a network of giant conveyor belts carries parcels metres above ground. The HSE found, "Stadium steps provided for use by engineers and contractors to undertake work at height on and around the conveyor system were in use without stabilising legs/bars being deployed prior to use".

Describing the company's failure to mitigate risks, the CWU's head of safety informed branches, "Royal Mail narrowly avoided being served with a 'Prohibition Notice' which would have shut down operations on site."

But why did the HSE refuse to impose a Prohibition Notice? And why hadn't the CWU *already* taken action to shut the site down while remedial measures were immediately conducted to prevent an accident waiting to happen?

"We've come to expect dirty tricks"

Royal Mail has twice used the threat of court injunctions over the past year to block lawful strike action. The CWU has responded on both occasions with a rapid climbdown, refusing to challenge the attack on their members' rights.

But Royal Mail can break the law and place workers' lives and limbs in danger without fear of prosecution. And while the CWU sits on a raft of joint union-management committees, its duty of care to dues-paying members counts for nothing.

HM Inspector Simon Bland has politely asked Royal Mail to "explain" what actions it has taken over contraventions of health and safety laws by July 14. Royal Mail has received no fine, just an invoice for the time HSE inspectors spent investigating and reporting the company's "material breaches."

The entire exercise smacks of a stage-managed operation.

Bland reported the HSE's visit involved speaking to "employee representatives". These consisted of management and CWU senior safety rep Carl McGinn. No reference is made to speaking to a single shop floor worker.

A postal worker at the Super Hub told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We have raised our safety concerns from day one of its opening. But this fell on deaf ears as far as management and the union were concerned. McGinn is hardly ever seen on the shop floor, and there have been no meetings organised by the

union, we did not even know the inspection was taking place.

"We've come to expect dirty tricks by management and the CWU. Only last week there was a collision in the yard between two lorries.

"For the amount of equipment and people moving about inside, it's just far too small a building. It's not fit for purpose. There were issues before they even put the machine in... and now with all the additional work, staff and machinery, it's been crammed so much, both inside and out.

"Like a lot of other mail centres, it's quite a huge agency-based staff and there a people being put on jobs that they shouldn't. It's obviously not their fault, but they haven't been trained. I haven't even had my induction, and I've been there a few years now. I was literally stood in the middle of the building with a manager saying, 'There's the traffic office, there's the toilet, there's your fire exit, see you later'."

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward regularly lectures workers that the union "has never turned away from change", portraying those against the CWU-Royal Mail agreement (currently being balloted) as Luddites.

But the HSE's report shows how Royal Mail's modernisation program uses technology regressively, squeezing greater exploitation and profit from workers for the hedge funds and private equity groups that control Royal Mail. Workers are treated as factory fodder.

The largest Royal Mail Super Hub—a 53-hectare site the size of 30 football pitches--opened last week in Daventry, Northamptonshire, part of a £1.4 billion parcel modernisation program over the past 5 years. As the new Midlands Super Hub comes into operation, a new round of revisions and "realignment activity" is set to begin across all mail centres and delivery offices. The CWU has committed to its implementation as part of the negotiator's agreement and last month's Joint Statement.

We invite postal workers to register to attend this Sunday's Zoom meeting, (July 9) at 7pm.



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