

Safety rep

Strategy on return to work is 'social murder'

Construction safety campaign Shut The Sites has released a video condemning the government's return-to-work strategy as "social murder".

It calls for the closure of all non-essential building sites and for all workers to be paid during the current crisis, irrespective of their employment status.

Last month, prime minister Boris Johnson said anyone who can't work from home, including in construction and manufacturing, should be encouraged to go to work.

"The government, HSE [Health and Safety Executive], Public Health England must know that on site, and as they travel to and from work, construction workers are exposed to, and are unwitting carriers of, the coronavirus," says Steve Tombs, head of the



JOHN HARRIS (REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK)

The campaign wants the closure of non-essential sites

department of social policy and criminology at the Open University, in the video.

"In my view this is criminal negligence, it's manslaughter, it's social murder."

Shut The Sites campaigner Dave Smith said: "On the exact same day that the government is forcing construction workers back to unsafe building sites, the Office for National Statistics has produced figures saying that three times more construction workers have

died from coronavirus than healthcare professionals."

Former HSE lead inspector for construction in London, Simon Hester, reminded workers of their rights under section 7 of the *Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974* and section 44 of the *Employment Rights Act 1996*. Under these provisions, they have the right to remove themselves from the workplace if they feel their health and safety is put at risk, including by coronavirus.

PPE still not fit for women

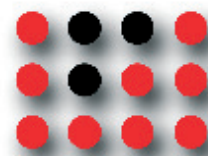
Women are still being overlooked when it comes to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), according to research by the specialists' Prospect union.

A survey, based on responses from 1,175 members, found face masks and safety glasses are a raw nerve for many women workers. More than one in

five (22%) reported ill-fitting eye protection, compared to 14% of men; and 16% of women had problems with poorly fitting respiratory equipment, compared to just 7% of men.

Almost half of female respondents said their PPE trousers fit poorly, compared to 17% of men, and 45% said their overalls fit poorly, compared to just 15% of men.

"Properly fitting PPE is essential both for comfort and effectiveness and it is generally women who are being overlooked," said Prospect senior deputy general secretary Sue Ferns. "This is a perennial problem, but for it to be persisting in the middle of the biggest acute health crisis in generations is appalling."



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HSE monitor

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Low-paid men have highest Covid-19 death rates

Unions have expressed alarm at last month's release of official figures showing that it is low-paid groups of workers that have the worst death rates from Covid-19.

The analysis of coronavirus-related deaths among different occupations released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) confirmed what unions and workers had seen on the ground. A key finding was that the highest death rates were among male workers in low-paid – or in official terminology “low-skilled” – jobs, including occupations where precarious employment is common.

The ONS report looked at the nearly 2,500 deaths that had been recorded among 20- to 64-year-olds in England and Wales up to 20 April 2020. Two-thirds of the deaths were of men, who suffered 9.9 deaths per 100,000 in that age group compared with a rate of 5.2 for women.

The ONS notes that the analysis “does not prove conclusively” that the different rates of death are caused by differences in occupational exposure, and that it does not take account of factors such as ethnic background – which is emerging as a major factor in vulnerability to Covid-19.

Cluster identified

Nevertheless, it is clear from the report that the highest rates of death are clustered in the lower-skilled occupational groups, while the lowest rates sit among the managerial, professional and associated professional groups.

Surprisingly, perhaps, doctors and nurses were not

found to have higher than average rates of Covid-related death. It has been suggested that this is because, although notoriously there have been shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), these workers are more likely to have PPE than others who are in close proximity to the virus through their work.

The analysis found that men working in the broad group of jobs known as “elementary” occupations, which includes, for example, security guards, catering assistants, hospital porters and low-skilled construction and manufacturing workers, had well over double the average rate of death involving Covid-19. Their fatality rate – the highest of all the broad occupational groups – was 21.4 per 100,000.

The next highest rate of death occurred among men in “caring, leisure and other services”. This broad group also saw a rate almost twice the male average – at 17.9 per 100,000.

Breaking down the broad job groups, the study revealed some very high rates among specific occupations. Security guards and related workers appeared to be the worst hit of all, with a disproportionate 45.7 deaths per 100,000 – or four-and-a-half times the average for working age men as a whole.

Other specific occupations found to have higher than average rates of death were: taxi drivers and chauffeurs (36.4 deaths per 100,000); chefs (35.9); care workers and home carers (32.0); bus and coach

drivers (26.4); and sales and retail assistants (19.8).

For women, the broad job group with the highest rate of coronavirus-related deaths was the “caring, leisure and other service occupations”. With 10.1 deaths per 100,000, this group suffered almost twice the fatality rate of the general female working age population.

Within this group, a particularly high rate was found among care workers and homecare workers specifically. As with men in these occupations, the rate was more than double the average for women of the same age in general – at 12.7 deaths per 100,000.

Union horror

Unions representing the groups worst affected expressed horror at the findings, with the GMB general union, for example, saying bluntly: “If you are low paid and working through the Covid-19 crisis you are more likely to die.”

The RMT transport union, which has bus and taxi drivers in membership, called for the convening of a national coronavirus safety summit to agree a national plan to protect workers and passengers in these sectors.

Meanwhile, the Unite general union called for a full public inquiry to look into the causes of the “alarming” statistics. Assistant general secretary Diana Holland said: “This is only an early snapshot of this dreadful disease, but it is clear that lower paid workers often from a [Black, Asian and ethnic minority] background have been at the greatest risk of dying during the pandemic.”

Inquiry call

She added that an inquiry is needed to understand if measures such as the lockdown were introduced too late, “and whether frontline workers were able to effectively socially distance at work, if effective cleaning regimes were in place and if workers were provided with the necessary PPE to properly protect them”.

Public services union UNISON, which represents many care workers, highlighted the lack of PPE in that sector. Its assistant general secretary Christina McAnea said: “These shocking figures reveal how care staff are literally putting their lives on the line by going to work.”

She said the lack of available PPE for care workers was “a scandal” as “their jobs can't be done without getting up close to the vulnerable and elderly individuals they care for in residential homes and in the community.”

She added that some care staff who should be shielding or self-isolating had felt pressured to go to work as they can't get by on less than their full wages.

The non-TUC IWGB union represents many security guards and private hire drivers who, it says, feel forced to work despite the “extreme risk”.

The union is taking legal action against the government “over its failure to provide proper income protection and sick pay to millions of precarious workers”.

Coronavirus (Covid-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered up to and including 20 April 2020, ONS

Abuse against shopworkers doubles during pandemic

Frontline shopworkers are suffering from shocking levels of abuse that have doubled since the start of the coronavirus crisis, according to a survey by retail union Usdaw.

The survey of more than 7,350 mainly essential workers in shops, distribution warehouses, road transport and delivery services looked at the impact of coronavirus in the workplace. It also found nearly 70% are experiencing anxiety and have raised concerns with their employer.

It found the average shopworker has been assaulted, threatened or

abused every 6.5 days, with one in six facing abuse on every shift they work. Almost 200 had been physically assaulted since the start of the outbreak.

Nearly a third (29%) of respondents reported Covid-19 related absences from work due to illness, self-isolating or shielding. Usdaw said the rate of sickness absence was nearly five times higher since the start of the outbreak. And, because levels of statutory sick pay (SSP) are so low, and many retail workers do not earn enough to qualify for it, there is a real danger that staff who should be

staying at home will continue to work, putting themselves and the public at risk.

Udaw is calling for a new deal for workers that includes respect for shopworkers, with new legislation providing a standalone offence of abusing, threatening or assaulting a public-facing worker; improved sick pay; and a real voice at work, with trade unions recognised in the workplace.

A report of the survey results, The impact of coronavirus on the workforce, can be found at: <http://www.usdaw.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=575d4419-a739-432b-ab54-10e84ad56e26>

TUC demands public inquiry on PPE

The government must set up an independent inquiry into the “grotesque” failure to provide frontline workers with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), says the TUC.

More than 80 health and social care workers had lost their lives to the virus when, in April, Public Health England issued guidance for health workers to reuse PPE if stocks run low.

TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady called on

ministers to commit to an inquiry starting by the end of the year. She said that frontline workers who are forced to risk their lives because they don’t have proper protective equipment are now “being told just to make do. This is a grotesque failure of planning and preparedness.”

Last month, Christina McAnea, assistant general secretary of the UNISON public services union, said many care staff were still going into workplaces where

safety kit is unavailable or locked away. She described this as “simply unacceptable” nearly two months after the introduction of the lockdown.

Meanwhile, a survey from the Royal College of Midwives found more than half of midwives do not feel safe carrying out home visits. A staggering 99% of those who felt unsafe cited fears of exposure to the coronavirus, with almost half (46%) saying it was because of a lack of appropriate PPE.

One in five healthcare workers could quit

More than one in five healthcare workers are more likely to leave their role following the pandemic as a result of Covid-19, according to a survey of almost 1,000 UK healthcare professionals by the think tank IPPR and pollers YouGov.

Half of healthcare workers said their mental

health had deteriorated since the Covid-19 crisis began, with 71% of younger workers aged 18-34 reporting their mental health had got worse. One in three workers said their physical health had worsened since the beginning of the crisis, and half said the government had not done enough to

protect their families’ health.

In a separate poll of the general public, 96% agreed the government should introduce more support for healthcare workers’ physical health, 95% backed more mental health support, and 88% said they should be paid more.

The report, Care fit for carers, can be found at: <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/care-fit-for-carers>

Coronavirus death leads to demands for improvements

The TSSA transport union last month demanded a series of improvements at Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) following the death from coronavirus of railway worker Belly Mujinga. She died after allegedly being spat at while on duty at London’s Victoria station by a member of the public who is said to have claimed he had the virus.

The union says GTR must take seriously concerns from staff and only sign off risk assessments after health and safety reps are satisfied measures have been put in place to mitigate the risks.

It called for staff to work in ticket offices rather than on the concourse, and to be kept two metres away from each other and passengers or be provided with appropriate protection such as visors. It also demanded an investigation into the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on black and minority ethnic frontline workers, and a full investigation into any assaults.

The union wrote to prime minister Boris Johnson asking him to extend to transport workers the coronavirus compensation scheme, which provides £60,000 to the family of NHS and care workers who die of the virus.

The FBU firefighters’ union marked International Workers’ Memorial Day on 28 April with a demand for government guidance to employers, stating that the death of firefighters and other key workers as a result of coronavirus should automatically be recognised as work-related so their families can receive compensation.

HSE 'needs proper support to enforce new guidance'

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) must have proper support if it is to enforce new guidelines on safe working through the coronavirus pandemic (see *TUC: new guidelines not tough enough, right*) and manage the transition back to work safely, specialists' union Prospect has demanded.

After PM Boris Johnson claimed the safety watchdog would be doing "spot checks" of workplaces to ensure compliance with the new rules, the government announced an additional £14m would be made available to the HSE.

But Prospect says this is a fraction of the money the HSE has lost in government cuts in recent years. It is just 10% of the real-terms funding cut the HSE has experienced over the past 10 years and there are now fewer than 500 main grade inspectors in the UK.

UK attitude to health and safety among worst in world, says think tank

International health and safety standards after Brexit, a research report published by the Institute of Employment Rights (IER) trade union think tank shows the UK has a poor record of commitment to international health and safety standards, and "our already hopelessly inadequate occupational health and safety regime" could get even worse post-Brexit.

TUC: new guidelines 'not tough enough'

New government guidelines "to help get Brits safely back to work" are not tough enough to justify saying it's safe to return, according to TUC health, safety and wellbeing policy officer Shelly Asquith.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published eight new *Working safely through coronavirus (Covid-19)* guidelines for different types of work earlier this month, in consultation with Public Health England (PHE) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Unions were consulted on the new guidance and TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady welcomed them as "a step in the right direction". But, speaking at a TUC webinar, Asquith explained how it falls short of the tough measures the TUC set out in its report, *Preparing for the return to work outside the home – A trade union approach*.

This calls for measures including mandatory risk assessments, made publicly available and with the approval of union health and safety reps; roving safety reps to advise on health and safety in workplaces where

there is no union presence or recognition; and much clearer guidance on social distancing and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE). Where social distancing cannot happen PPE must be provided, and where it is not provided workers should not come to work.

As a result of the union input, new guidance contains much stronger language on risk assessments, encouragement (but not a requirement) to publish assessments, and recognition that employers need to consult with trade union safety reps.

But the TUC also wants to see serious enforcement, with much more funding and "teeth" for the HSE and local authority regulators, as well as a public information campaign to ensure workers know their rights. Asquith pointed out that by mid-May, the HSE had not served a single enforcement notice in relation to Covid-19.

Hazards Campaign spokesperson Janet Newsham said "there should be no return to workplaces unless workers agree it really can be made safe to do so".

In a statement to the education secretary, nine unions with members in the education sector – AEP, GMB, NAHT, NASUWT, NEU, NSEAD, Prospect, UNISON and Unite – set out a list of tests they say must be met before schools can safely reopen. They say there must first be a full rollout of a national test and trace scheme and a national Covid-19 education taskforce must agree statutory guidance for safe reopening. ♦ Seventeen health unions, representing over a million NHS workers, have published a blueprint for the safe opening up of the NHS. Measures they say must be in place include fast, comprehensive and accessible testing, and ample PPE.

The new government guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

The TUC report is at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-04/Preparing%20for%20the%20return%20to%20work.pdf>

The education unions' statement can be found at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/unions-set-out-needs-safe-reopening-schools-letter-education-secretary>

The NHS unions' blueprint is at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/26086.pdf>

Covid classification challenged

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is calling on member states to classify the Covid-19 virus in the highest risk group after the European Commission decided to include it in the *Biological Agents Directive*, but as an agent belonging only in the second highest risk group.

ETUC deputy general

secretary Per Hilmersson said the characteristics of Covid-19 justify its classification in the highest risk group, due to the lack of an effective treatment or vaccine and the high risk of workers who are in contact with the public spreading the virus to the community.

"A classification of Covid-19 in the highest risk

group would give a stronger protection for workers in hospitals and elderly care homes, and all workers in contact with the public," he explained. "It would improve occupational health but also strengthen the possibility of reducing the spread of the virus, and thereby the mortality, among the general population."