



## **Mobilise to keep workers safe as Government ditches safety measures**

PCS must continue to press that all the employers do everything possible to keep our members safe. Regardless of the Tories lifting the covid restrictions our employers still have the legal requirement to protect the workforce from harm. In the main this means continuing to ensure our members can work safely from home. Workers should only be in the workplace by exception where essential work cannot be done from home or where it is safer for a member to be in the workplace than at home. All these exceptions should be subject to union agreement. We must actively resist any forced return to the workplace. The consequences of contracting covid-19 remain severe – fatal in some cases and also with significant numbers developing long-covid with long-term chronic illness or disability. No-one should be put at risk just by going to work. The union needs to be prepared to explore every avenue to protect members including safety legislation for severe and imminent danger and balloting for strike action.

Health experts have pointed out that the best way to increase transmission of an airborne virus is to do just what Johnson has announced he is going to do – abolish physical distancing, universal face mask wearing and encourage people to gather together in under-ventilated spaces for prolonged periods. The Tories are setting up another colossal natural experiment which will put wave 3 of the pandemic into super exponential growth. Putting all the blame on us as they make it all about individual responsibility rather than properly implementing measures that keep everyone safe.

The learning to live with covid mantra just means the Tories are happy to accept that people will die and do nothing about it. This same phrase was repeated by the Welsh Labour Government Health Minister. The devolved Governments have the opportunity to take a safer track in dealing with covid-19 and we should ensure that the trade union movement brings pressure to bear on these politicians to not just follow in Johnson's reckless footsteps.

Even government estimates are that there could be a daily rate of 50,000 covid cases by 19th July and 100,000 by 16th August. The more the virus is left to spread unchecked then the more likely it is to mutate. This could include becoming more resistant and make the vaccinations less effective against new variants.

Vaccinations alone are unlikely to end the pandemic – new variants and ones resistant to the vaccine could race through working class communities – where the population is already most at risk. A lot of emphasis is being placed on the vaccination levels however there still remains a significant proportion of people who have not had both doses. Even assuming that approximately 20% of unvaccinated people are protected by previous SARS-CoV-2 infection, this still leaves more than 17 million people with no protection against COVID-19. Given this, and the high transmissibility of the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant, exponential growth will probably continue until millions more people are infected, leaving hundreds of thousands of people with long-term illness and disability. This strategy risks creating a generation left with chronic health problems and disability, the personal and economic impacts of which might be felt for decades to come. Even those who have had both jabs can still contract covid, spread the virus and become ill.

Whilst hospital admissions are at a lower rate than in the previous waves – any increase will put additional pressure on totally exhausted NHS workers. Our health service was already stretched before the pandemic let alone after 16 months of battling the pandemic. There is incredible demand now on already stretched health services to deal with all the backlog that has been delayed because of the pandemic.

The latest Health Foundation report identified that working age adults in poorest areas of England were almost four times more likely to die from covid-19 than those in wealthier areas. The Impact of austerity cuts – poor health, increased financial insecurity and strained public services made the UK more vulnerable to the pandemic and higher death rate. As well as fighting to protect the safety of our members PCS should also revitalise the campaign for the Alternative to address underlying wider problems which impact on members health, safety and welfare.

It is vital that the trade union movement must demand that measures are kept in place to keep the number of new cases low on top of the vaccination rollout. Our members face the danger of working in confined indoor spaces in the workplace and on public transport which are the riskiest areas to contract covid, combined with all the issues associated with low pay- living in areas with poor and overcrowded housing and services cut to the bone.

We must demand an improved and effective track and trace system delivered by the public sector. It is important that the guidance keeps pace with the full range of symptoms and how the virus impacts on different age groups to help with early identification of cases and better opportunity to stamp out outbreaks,

Self-isolation must continue to be used as this is the only effective way to break transmission. There must be no reliance on lateral flow tests to give a false sense of security to people which can directly result in increasing the risks of transmitting the virus. Whilst the Tories have thrown £billion at their Operation Moonshot and put too much faith and over-reliance in these quick tests, the US Food and Drug Agency has advised these tests should be thrown in the bin or returned to the manufacturer because of the spurious performance claims.

Whilst the Tories are rushing to dump all the safety measures, employers still have a legal duty to protect workers from harm. They must risk assess the workplace and trade unions must ensure that employers take into account that the risks associated with covid-19 are still severe with life-threatening or long-term debilitating consequences from contracting the virus. Employers should still be working with the union health and safety reps to eliminate the risk of contracting covid and preventing the onward transmission in the workplace

1 in 5 of those who have tested positive for covid reported that they had been affected by long covid. Latest reports suggest that an estimated 1 in 8 will contract Long COVID. This is having a huge impact on workers with two thirds affected with a consequence on their ability to do day to day activities.

PCS should make demands that employers protect their workforce and the public by: –

- No forced return to the workplace. Any return and on what basis only in agreement with the union
- Full safety measures to protect all members at home and in the workplace including supportive measures on mental health and stress
- Services to the public should continue to be delivered remotely as far as possible.

Where work does need to be done in the workplace PCS must demand: –

- Full risk assessment done with the union health and safety reps
- Keep all safety measures in place to stop onward transmission of covid in the workplace
- Minimise staffing levels to only levels to deliver essential work that cannot be done from home.
- Keep 2m social distancing at all times between everyone
- Additional cleaning of all touchpoint surfaces regularly through the day
- Ensure all indoor spaces are well ventilated with fresh air throughout the day
- Face coverings to be worn in all public spaces
- Flexibility for workers to travel when it is quietest
- Individual risk assessments for workers who are even more at risk with underlying health conditions, clinically extremely vulnerable workers and black workers. And for those not yet vaccinated.
- Full pay for all workers who need to self-isolate
- No use of sickness absence procedures to penalise those self-isolating
- No use of quick lateral flow tests to reduce self-isolation time
- Full support and reasonable adjustments for workers suffering from long covid
- Support transport unions' demands for face coverings and social distancing to remain on public transport.

As well as putting demands on employers we must build to actively mobilise our members to resist any attempts to force anyone back into the workplace or remove safety measures in workplaces. This means using all avenues, including H&S legal rights to protect members from serious and imminent danger and balloting for strike action. It is vital this is done by working closely with, supporting and fully involving branches in standing up to the employers. All branches should be encouraged to discuss what they can do to build resistance to potential attacks on our members' safety and how they can organise holding members' meetings. Something which has been so lacking in the DWP safety campaign, along with a lack of urgency from the leadership to act to mobilise the weight of our members behind the campaign and the negotiators in talks with management. Whilst the government has been driving to push members and the public back into jobcentres and branches have been left to fend for themselves.

Any threats to PCS members should be responded to straightaway and quickly mobilise public ways to involve members in demonstrating our opposition to any drive to bring members back into the workplace.

Whilst robustly defending members rights to work safely at home as protection from the pandemic, PCS must also be cautious about the bosses' agenda in moving to contractual hybrid and home working as a cost-cutting exercise.

It is also clear that the fight for safety must also address the impact of austerity which has been a major contributing factor in the high covid-19 death rate which has swept through working class communities.

The fight for safety needs to include the wider demands for job security, decent pay, reversal of cuts to our services, affordable good quality housing, shorter working week with no loss of pay. As well as resisting any attempts by the Tories to make us pay for the pandemic.

