



OMICRON VARIANT: SAFETY MUST COME FIRST IN DWP

PCS reps and members in DWP have spent the November fighting against a planned return to offices across the UK. With little leadership provided by the union's Group Executive Committee, beyond aggressive-sounding emails, reps and members were left to take the steps that ultimately forced DWP to back down, leaving the employer's plans in even greater disarray than before.

Build the campaign now – do not wait for January!

Broad Left Network supporters in DWP are calling on the union's leadership to fight for:

- No return to offices for back of house roles, guaranteed until the end of winter.
- For any future return to involve thorough consultation, to take account of further information about the Omicron variant, about the pressure on the NHS and about the booster roll out.
- For Jobcentres to return to emergency face to face appointments only.
- For CO2 monitors to be provided in every workplace.

In a significant number of areas, DWP has back down on the return of back of house staff to their offices, at least temporarily. In Retirement Services Directorate across the UK, and in all parts of DWP in Wales, management have retreated. In areas like Universal Credit, the retreat is uneven and incomplete, with some messages indicating a voluntary approach and others continuing with a mandatory approach. BLN reps in these areas are working to oppose any mandatory return.

Even in those areas where members have successfully prevented DWP from forcing them back into the office, the return is only delayed until January. We need to be ready to further oppose this.

Branches must take the lead

The union's DWP Group Executive Committee, following the lead of the union's National Executive, has emailed all members in DWP to "remind them of their rights". This is not sufficient. Reps have proven at sites across the UK, since the pandemic first landed, that when members stick together, the employer is forced to back down and to take account of what members demand.

We have called on the GEC to organise a national reps meeting, to ensure every site across the UK is prepared and ready to issue "Regulation 8" letters, upon DWP issuing instructions to return, allowing members to use Health and Safety legislation to prevent a return to the office. In the absence of this leadership, however, branches must pro-actively prepare.

Elected GEC reps who support the Broad Left Network have organised a national meeting at 6.30pm on 12th January, with the option to bring this forward should DWP try to wrong-foot the union by announcing plans when reps and members are on leave, as they did during the summer. Further details will be sent out to all branches. Contact details are overleaf.

Devolved areas

Following the emergence of the Omicron variant, the devolved governments have urged all employers to keep workers at home – but they have not yet changed the regulations that would ensure this. We welcome the victory won by members in Wales, to halt any return to the office – but the goodwill of DWP cannot be relied upon. As the GEC has shown no interest in attempting to exert political pressure to prevent a mandatory return to the offices, here too branches can take the lead.

Defend our FTA & casual members, defend transitional sites

At the same time as showing their complete disregard for the safety of staff, a series of recent announcements has caused shock across DWP. First came the announcement by the DWP Permanent Secretary on 24th November that it would not be possible for DWP to keep on all of the 13,500 temporary work coaches, recruited during the pandemic. Then on 25th November, DWP senior leadership put out an email to 37 sites reminding them that the plan was to close these sites.

Disgracefully, this email also contained ideas about how staff at these sites should prepare, e.g. by undertaking further qualifications, or apprenticeships, in order to make themselves more employable and therefore more likely to gain redeployment following the closure. Throughout the material put out by DWP there were strong hints that redeployment was not guaranteed; jobs are at stake at offices from Dover to Dundee, from Liverpool to London. Members are angry and want answers.

DWP Group Executive Committee: deafening silence

Four out of the 37 sites mentioned above have already had closure dates announced. Redundancies look likely. A week on from this, nothing has been heard from the GEC. GEC officers have reassured reps that they are giving all possible support to the branches involved, but without a campaign, “support” doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. We need the GEC to lead, to link up branches and to prepare the union in DWP for a major national campaign.

Meanwhile, GEC officers are blabbing about how up to 7,000 temporary work coach jobs are at risk. This is not what management have said. This figure has not been reported by GEC officers to the GEC as a whole. Most importantly of all, reps and members are being kept in the dark. If this is true, it is a massive attack on current staffing levels. Yet the GEC has admitted that they have not even asked for permanency for all temporary staff, they have merely asked for targeted recruitment.

Branches move towards dispute

Broad Left Network supporters have been working in their branches and with sympathetic branches specifically to target the sites where Fixed Term & casual staff are based, in full recognition that only by organising these members and preparing for action can we put maximum pressure on DWP to make them permanent. As a consequence, some contract extensions have been announced. This is not enough and some staff are still scheduled to leave in March. We have time to build the campaign that could defeat such a move – if you are interested, get in touch with us.

Workloads, staffing, office closures – a national campaign is needed

At the same time as DWP have been preparing for office closures and for letting go thousands of temporary staff, not to mention potentially making redundancies, members at work are under more pressure than ever. In front facing jobs, members report a return of the pressure to refer every single fail to attend for a sanction. This is madness, in the era of Covid-19. Twenty appointments a day are not uncommon in Jobcentres, and telephone lines are snowed under. Meanwhile DWP have privatised parts of PIP telephony, causing chaos across that benefit.

- We must fight to retain our FTA & casual staff in DWP, including 13,500 work coaches.
- We must fight to retain our offices – closures are ludicrous when DWP has just opened dozens of “REEP” sites as a result of the pandemic.
- Where offices must close, because the owners are throwing us out, every job must be guaranteed and we must secure the best redeployment terms for members.
- We must fight to reduce workloads on all staff across DWP – further recruitment is needed!

This is a national campaign that takes in vast swathes of the operational areas of DWP. The GEC is currently hiding behind the old “there’s no mood” excuse, instead of pro-actively getting out to build a mood. We are patiently working on this, gradually moving areas towards dispute, and linking them up as each one moves forward. We need all reps who wish to fight on behalf of their members to link up with us – so if you want to fight, contact us.

Join the Broad Left Network.



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