

Survey exposes COVID-19 dangers facing call centre workers

By Joe Mount
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A detailed survey has exposed the shocking conditions facing UK call centre workers during the coronavirus pandemic.

Boris Johnson's Conservative government denoted call centre operatives as "key workers." This meant that throughout lockdown imposed on March 23, many major companies could operate call centres to maintain and even expand the flow of profits to their shareholders. In the process they exposed workers to serious hazards.

Data collected through an ongoing survey by Professor Phillip Taylor, an expert on employment issues at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, centred on a confidential questionnaire, began on April 8. Over 2,800 workers responded, with Taylor receiving several calls each day from call centre staff frightened to enter their offices and risk contracting the virus due to employer malpractice.

Call centre operatives are placed at risk on multiple levels, due to commuting—often by public transport—to cramped, overcrowded offices where management often insist on normal working practice, including meetings proceeding as normal.

Approximately 1.3 million people in Britain are employed in call centres, four percent of the workforce. The COVID-19 fatality rate is generally higher among lower-skilled occupations. According to official figures, those in sales and customer service occupations are suffering 14.3 deaths per 100,000 males (the average death rates differ greatly by gender.)

Reports have emerged of call centre workers dying of COVID-19. Victims include an employee of multinational outsourcing firm Capita in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, who died in April. A female worker in her 50s who worked at Virgin Media call centre in Wythenshawe, Manchester died on April 2. She left work on March 2 to self-isolate. The office was closed for just one day before opening again.

The *Manchester Evening News* reported, "It prompted scores of worried members of staff to contact the M.E.N. to express concern about an alleged lack of social distancing at the office and another office in Baguley, alleging they were being asked to carry out non-essential work like convincing customers not to leave them."

Professor Taylor was told of multiple critical hospitalisations and even fatalities among the co-workers of those responding to the survey. Three-quarters of respondents had colleagues in their call centre forced to self-isolate after developing symptoms.

The survey measured the acute concern and suffering among call centre workers: 78 percent believed they might get coronavirus at work and 91 percent feared passing the virus onto their families. Seven-in-ten reported feeling "very scared" at having to continue to report for work.

The author notes that the total length of the responses from workers—of over 200,000 words—is a measure of the impact of the crisis and the social tensions it is generating.

Most call centre workers (82 percent of replies) felt their services are non-essential and they are being made to risk illness and death unnecessarily. As large sections of the economy and public sector have switched to online operation, many call centres are critical (e.g. the National Health Service help line emergency services), but most are not, including certain financial services, retail, etc. One worker cited in the study said, "I'm going to work during a national lockdown as I am now described by the government as 'essential' when only a few months ago I was 'low skilled'... it's a joke."

Workers expressed their scorn at management neglect. Many have been coerced back to work by performance targets and financial pressures, despite presenting undiagnosed symptoms or soon after recovering from the disease. Seventy eight percent of respondents reported

feeling pressurised into attending work. One worker reported several cases where management, despite being informed of the condition of ill co-workers, compelled them to attend: “They came to work as they were worried about their job due to discipline action. They were told then to go home after completing half of the shift.”

Management at many workplaces have concealed incidences of the disease to prevent opposition mounting to their back-to-work drive. One respondent explained, “Of my knowledge there has been one confirmed case and two suspected cases. The confirmed case was a colleague... he required hospital treatment. Managers are aware of this and tried to deny the situation at first. When the colleague eventually confirmed it to everyone for himself, they then accepted that it had happened but have made several cover stories to try to keep the office open.”

Workers with pre-existing health conditions, who are at increased risk, are being made to report for work.

Many call centres contain large numbers working in confined spaces with shared facilities and breathing in recycled air. Alongside complaints of dirty offices and a lack of sanitation, such as insufficient hand sanitiser and toilet cleaning, only 4 percent said that their employer had provided face masks.

Only half of those surveyed reported being at least two metres distant from their colleagues. A particularly strong opposition was expressed to “hot desking,” whereby multiple people on different shifts share the same desk space.

These concerns were voiced by workers at two of NHS 24’s main contact centres, in Cardonald Park, Glasgow, and Clydebank. Every worker of 800 surveyed at the sites said it was impossible to socially distance at the required two metres. Ninety one percent said they “do not feel safe at work,” while 90 percent said health and safety concerns “have made them think about not going into work.”

Many call centre businesses have not organised homeworking. Taylor’s report notes, “Two-thirds of staff still working in the sector have asked bosses to work from home, but just four percent of all requests have been granted.”

Taylor’s survey notes that it is supported by various trade unions and health and safety campaigning bodies, notably Hazards. The main aim of the survey is “To expose bad employment practices hazardous to call-handlers and, through intervention by trade unions, health and safety and regulatory bodies, to stop them...”

The claim that the employment practises exposed can

be opposed by the trade unions is belied by all experience. Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O’Grady described the report as “grim reading”, adding, “Bosses who refuse to take steps to protect their workforces should be prosecuted.”

But the unions will do nothing. Such rhetoric is aimed at concealing their corporatist role and collaboration in enforcing the return-to-work, beginning with Monday’s reopening of schools.

Labour’s Shadow Employment Minister Andy McDonald described the report as “deeply concerning” before declaring that the Johnson’s governments “guidance”—a government whose policies have led to at least 60,000 coronavirus deaths—was the way forward. “The government’s guidance must be strictly implemented and enforced, in the interests of workers’ safety and to protect public health,” he insisted. The unions must be involved to ensure “workplaces are safe to work in now and when we emerge from this crisis.”

Labour councils have played a key role in signing off unsafe working conditions and the unions are policing the return to work. McDonald’s party nationally is collaborating in implementing a return to work in a de facto national unity government.

Call centre workers can only oppose the dangerous conditions they face by establishing rank and file safety committees, independent of the trade unions. These must organise the resources to create safe working conditions, including provisions for home working, sanitation, and social distancing to halt the spread of contagion.

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