

# Govt Deadly Failures - includes workers killed in West Mids

Press release, 14-Apr-20 for immediate release

- from Birmingham Trades Union Council and West Midlands Hazards Trust

Over Easter, West Midlands health workers who died from Covid19 include nurse Elsie Chafalumira Sasuze; Dr Best Nkhoma; and Leilana Dayrit; these shortly after nurses Areema Nasreen, Aimee O'Rourke, and 2 healthcare assistants. These are just some of the tragedies in the West Midlands, currently one of the most virus-hit regions in the UK. Yet, work-related deaths from Covid-19 were preventable, say Hazards campaigners and trade unions.

Workers in the frontline e.g. health and care staff, are most at risk right now. But all public-facing staff are at risk, including all those working to deliver essential services, from refuse collectors to shopworkers and school staff, and all need adequate protection, which is not being sufficiently provided. Staff and residents in care homes do too. All are desperate for better protection and testing. While all are at risk, those in workplaces without unions, in privatised companies, and insecure employment, face the worst situation, with next to no protection.

Birmingham Trades Union Council (BTUC)<sup>1</sup> said: "We have heard workers in our union branches talking about the risks their members face every day, with totally inadequate protection and instructions. For example, care workers have been told that they don't need PPE unless the person they visit at home is actually showing symptoms like coughing. Yet, both the carer, who often meets many people, and the cared-for are potential risks to each other, even before and after they show actual symptoms of the virus, and can be infected without symptoms. We know that many workers now see the need to join a union, and thousands have been joining since this started. We are glad to say that that the TUC and individual unions have been instrumental in getting the government to bring in such financial support to workers unable to work as has been available so far, and have been tirelessly helping workers with the many practical issues they face, despite their own staff having the same problems as everyone else. Never forget that many health workers from abroad also have to pay a lot of money for their own NHS care, and BAME workers face extra problems due to racism and inequality. Other essential workers, such as those dealing with Universal Credit, are either working under immense pressure due to the massive increase in claims, or have been sent home due to health conditions but have not been issued with laptops to allow them to work. We are glad to see that committees of essential workers are coming together to see what can be done, and we are gearing up our activities accordingly. The TUC are hosting [an online event at 2 PM](#) <sup>2</sup> on Workers Memorial Day, and encouraging TU members to register to join in. We urge everyone to write to MPs and Cllrs demanding better protection."

The UK Hazards Campaign recently issued a statement "[Deadly Failures have placed millions of workers at unnecessary coronavirus exposure risk](#)", backed up by [academic review](#). <sup>3</sup> Hazards says that "a fatal combination of missed opportunities, ignored warning signs and the failure to stop non-essential work have made the Covid-19 a bigger and more deadly epidemic in the UK". <sup>4</sup> This statement also includes a plea to ban all non-essential building work, such as they now have in Scotland; for all PPE requirements to be for the highest standard of protection<sup>5</sup>; places specific demands on Govt and employers; and demands better enforcement from the Health and Safety Executive. <sup>6</sup> The situation is so much worse, says the research, due to years of cuts and austerity. Find out more about the situation in #Covid19.

Neil Vernon<sup>7</sup> of WMHT said: “International Workers Memorial Day commemorates all those killed and injured by work. Along with BTUC, we are planning activities for the annual Workers Memorial Day in Birmingham, on 28 April, as are equivalent groups throughout the Midlands and the world. On top of all the usual industrial deaths, this year we also have deaths from this virus, largely preventable, and stress levels for all are even higher. We hope that as many people as possible will join in on the 28<sup>th</sup>, e.g. make [suitable window displays, selfies with placards](#) or take photos of candles dedicated to those killed by work, to photograph and send to #IWMD20 nationally, locally to #MidsIWMD and as many other places as possible. You can put a candle (safely) or light in the window at 8 PM. Those still at work can have a minute’s silence and think of suitable ways to mark the occasion.”

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Kathy Gaffney, Executive Committee Birmingham Trades Union Council, is available afternoons to be contacted. Pictures are available, some now, and more including video clips) by April 28.

<sup>2</sup> See the [TUC Workers Memorial Day plans](#), and [TUC issued a recent press release](#), with examples of workers with inadequate protection and saying what needs to be changed

<sup>3</sup> Executive Summary of [review](#) by [Prof. Andy Watterson of Stirling University](#) includes the following:

“The threat to worker health and safety has not been theoretical since December 2019 and so there has been and is no justification for inaction now...

Solutions to preventing risk from pandemic hazards have been known and advocated in global and national agencies and by NGOs for many years...

Adequate supplies of PPE, early and proper planning, risk assessment and management to protect worker health and safety and the public health are comparatively cheap as is basic regulation and inspection...

The UK pandemic is also occurring against a background of years of cuts in the health and social care sectors and decades of cuts specifically in the occupational and environmental health and safety sector. In all parts of the UK in late March 2020 there are still major challenges to protect all workers from COVID-19. These ongoing health and safety challenges, some deep rooted and others easily fixed quickly, include the need for better occupational health surveillance, more and extensive testing, tracking and tracing along with the ‘shutdown’ measure now belatedly in force...

International agencies have done better than the UK government & many scientific civil servants. Some UK professional bodies have produced extensive health and safety advice and called for improved PPE, others have been less active. NGOs and trade unions have generally been a very good source of information on pandemic risks and acted early in analysing what was needed and why.”

<sup>4</sup> the Hazards Campaign document also contains an infographic outlining the failures on a timeline

<sup>5</sup> Hazards criticises Public Health England's standards for PPE

<sup>7</sup> Neil Vernon, Deputy Chair of West Midlands Hazards Trust, is currently available for interview