



Issue No. 104/2020 | 19th May 2020

## TO ALL CWU MEMBERS IN FIELD ENGINEERING ROLES

Dear Colleague

### Reporting of abuse stemming from 5G/COVID-19 conspiracy theory

Field engineering members across the entire telecommunications sector are reminded of the paramount importance of ensuring that any abusive behaviour they encounter in the course of their duties is formally reported and logged – especially where it relates to ‘fake news’ that coronavirus is somehow being spread by the rollout of 5G.

Six weeks after the absurd conspiracy theory began with a widely shared video on social media, feedback received by the CWU suggests the number of engineers being subjected to threatening behaviour by members of the public continues to escalate – despite concerted efforts to quash the groundless rumour by the CWU, Ofcom, health experts politicians and the mainstream media.

Although the major social media platforms moved swiftly to take down the original offending video and other material perpetuating the falsehood, within just a fortnight more than 80 instances of abuse had been reported across the UK, 35 of which involved Openreach engineers. Today the abuse tally stands at 76 in Openreach alone. The vast majority of those targeted were conducting work that had nothing whatsoever to do with 5G.

Mercifully, to date the CWU has not received any reports of serious physical assaults, though in one case an Openreach engineer sitting in his van was soaked when a woman screaming abuse about 5G threw a bottle of water at him when he stopped at traffic lights in London. A number of members have been spat at, however, and some have felt sufficiently intimidated by hostile individuals or groups to be forced to withdraw to a safe location.

The majority of attacks have occurred in urban locations, typically involving verbal tirades being hurled at engineers working in the street, normally by individuals in cars. However, in an environment where a small minority of mindless individuals feel able to lash out at key workers who are doing their utmost to keep the UK’s vital communications infrastructure up and running at a time of national crisis, the fear is that it is only a matter of time before we witness an actual physical assault.

That’s why it’s essential that every single incident is formally reported and logged, so that patterns and locations of attacks can be analysed. The CWU understands BT Group is already drawing up ‘heat maps’ which could help shape local protocols to minimise future risk to

engineers and potentially assist in the targeting of serial perpetrators. We've also received assurances that the company is actively working with Facebook to ensure any further posts perpetuating the 5G/COVID-19 conspiracy theory are promptly removed – though members also have a role to play in highlighting offending material.

Whatever company you work for the message from the CWU is the same: If you experience abusive behaviour in the course of trying to carry out your job, first and foremost prioritise your safety and remove yourself from the situation as best you can.

If you feel physically threatened, do not hesitate to ring 999 - but, even with less serious cases of verbal abuse or hostility, make sure the incident is formally recorded using the established accident reporting process and that your manager is aware of what has happened. On top of that, ALWAYS inform your local rep or CWU Branch – because it's only by being aware of the abusive situations that members experience that the CWU can, both locally and nationally, ensure that steps are taken to address the issue and provide any support that is needed.

### **Contact the CWU**

The Union remains here to keep you safe and assist you through this difficult time. If you have concerns or need assistance please contact your local rep or Branch. If you don't know which Branch you are in you can find out via [www.cwu.org/contact-us](http://www.cwu.org/contact-us).

**We are here to help. Keep Safe**

**From Dave Jukes**  
Assistant Secretary