

## RETAIL AND THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK: ORGANISE TO DEFEND WORKERS' INTERESTS

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Coronavirus is sending tremors through capitalist society. Many workers who have been enduring increasing casualised working conditions, such as zero or short hour contracts, have had further cuts to sick pay and other contractual changes. But workers in the food manufacturing, distribution and retail sectors, which Usdaw organises, are now like an 'emergency service'.

Given the bulk of Usdaw's membership is concentrated in four large supermarket chains (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Co-op) then this throws up huge questions for members and reps to deal with in ensuring our members health and safety while providing these vital services.

Firstly, it is clear many Usdaw members will have to remain at work through this crisis to help ensure supply of food, but this raises crucial issues of health and safety. Many workers experience of cleaning schedules in normal times is that there often isn't enough time to complete cleaning rotas. Reports indicate that new cleaning regimes installed by companies to attempt to protect workers from Coronavirus are simply not carried through. Others are inconsistent - providing hand sanitisers to



counters and checkouts staff, but then not wiping down trolley and door handles or visa-versa.

To ensure any procedures are fully-implemented and additional ones are brought in where workers demand them, Usdaw members need to come together in stores and establish local health and safety committees. Reps should take the initiative to try and establish these. These can raise issues with management for action - while also being prepared to use provisions under health and safety legislation to refuse to work in unsafe environments.

Secondly, given government advice for workers and their immediate household to self-isolate if they have symptoms of Coronavirus - and the closures

of schools due to the outbreak - then we have to demand that any worker who can't work is not financially worse off.

Scandalously, Wilko, where workers are represented by GMB union, are attempting to cut sick pay for a second period of absence. While, due to the government extension of statutory pick pay from day one, there is more of a safety net under workers - this should immediately be increased to full pay with no triggering of attendance management procedures.

We welcome that Usdaw's call for food supply chain, pharmacy and funeral workers to be classed as 'key workers' has been recognised, with schools helping to provide childcare for those workers

and support the demands that NEU members are putting forward to ensure this is done as safely as possible. Thirdly, empty shelves in supermarkets abound, particularly for goods including toilet rolls, cleaning products, ready meals, frozen food and others.

The government should immediately introduce price controls on staple goods and supplies to halt price gouging as well as rationing of items to ensure fair distribution. Changes to opening hours to facilitate restocking should be agreed in discussion with union representatives, any proposals to move staff from their regular duties and shifts should be done under the control of the union to ensure those workers are capable of carrying out those new duties.

Fourthly, there are widespread reports of recruitment drives by retail companies with Morrisons talking of recruiting 3,500 extra

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workers, particularly to assist with expanding online deliveries. Usdaw reps should have the opportunity to attend induction meetings and bring these workers into the union. We believe those jobs should be full-time ones, unless workers choose to work part-time, but they should also be hiring or increasing hours, where existing workers wish to, to ensure cleaning routines are fully adhered to. Trade unions to agree staffing levels after Coronavirus with temporary staff hired offered permanent jobs and ensure closed counters and cafes re-open.

Finally, the government has talked about wanting to work with trade unions to tackle this crisis - if the government is serious about this then they should bring in immediate measures such as compulsory collective bargaining throughout the retail sector to ensure full measures to protect workers and their interests.

Some companies are increasing retail workers' pay, such as Mercadona in Spain which has given workers a 20% pay rise, while Amazon has given its workers a £2 increase (while still brutally exploiting them however).

Usdaw should call on the government to increase the minimum wage immediately to at least the £10 an hour it currently demands, which would benefit workers in care, deliveries and so on who have generally faced low pay and casualisation like retail workers.

Despite the talk of 'working together' in the joint statement by the major supermarket chains, for their managements its profits that ultimately comes first.

Rather than simply going along with company directives Usdaw should be putting demands forward in workplaces where Usdaw has a presence. Usdaw should be calling upon the government to close non-essential retail outlets with workers again being

compensated in full for wages lost. If shops are to remain open Usdaw reps and members should be calling on companies to implement the health and safety and pay and conditions protections we've outlined.

Where companies are claiming to struggle Usdaw should demand that they open their books to trade union scrutiny to ensure that they are not simply guarding profits.

Supermarket share prices are rising compared to most other retail companies who are struggling due to store closures and reduced custom. This indicates that the markets at least think they're making a killing.

On 17 March, for example, shares in Sainsbury's were up by 6.6%, Morrisons was up by 5% and Tesco was up by 1%. Online delivery service company Ocado's shares leapt from 1,077p on 12 March to 1,344p on 17 March.

The chaos and competition of the market has also been exposed and competition laws have had to be relaxed to ensure companies can share supply chains and delivery vans. This shows the vital need for co-ordination and socialist planning of our food supply chain, rather than the chaos that the capitalist 'free market' has created.

Ultimately the only way to guarantee that companies are run on the basis of social need rather than private profit is by bringing them into public ownership under workers' control and management.

Retail and distribution workers have a fundamental role in securing the safety and sustenance of the wider population. Usdaw must step up if it is to earn the authority amongst workers to call itself the campaigning union.

■ See the Socialist Party's 'Coronavirus: A workers' charter' and many more articles providing a socialist response to the Coronavirus crisis at [socialistparty.org.uk](http://socialistparty.org.uk)

## The view from the shopfloor



### A Sainsbury's rep who contacted the Activist on 16 March told us that:

"You don't see empty shelves like this, even at Christmas". Sainsbury's has given workers seven days fully-paid leave for self-isolating but "given the government now says 14 days isolation that should be extended immediately". "We had a shipment of hand sanitiser come in over the weekend, and it was good that Sainsbury's has been putting some of this aside for staff, ensuring that all checkout operators and the kiosk have access to it." However, there are no procedures in place for wiping down door and trolley handles.

"The store has a sign-up sheet for people willing to do shopping for others who have to isolate - obviously that's a help to those people, but I can't help feeling that Sainsbury's are doing it to protect their profits by making sure people shop here."

### A Morrisons café worker told us

**about the turmoil in their store:** "We only started displaying coronavirus guidelines in the cafe about social distancing which no one pays attention to. The soap in the cafe that staff use is making my skin crack from washing and I have no idea if it even kills Coronavirus. We haven't been supplied any hand sanitiser cause customers get priority and the moment it's put out it's gone.

We've had basically no staff in. Yesterday, I had to shut down the cafe with only two people, one of whom had only worked three shifts prior. Today I've had no one to cover my breaks because no one else can take over the till. Plus the cafe is hemorrhaging profits cos no one wants to eat here anyway." The rumour is that the cafe's gonna be shut after today and we're gonna go on the shop floor but there's no way we'd keep the same hours.

And, get this, Morrison's has graciously set up a trolley for people to purchase and donate items to people in the hospital next door INSTEAD OF JUST LIKE? DONATING STOCK FOR FREE!"

### A food factory worker and Usdaw

**member:** "There have been changes in procedure - with staggered breaks, fewer tables in the canteen and further apart, tables sanitised after every use, extra hygiene with staff spraying everything all day, extra sanitiser on entering the building and by the clocking in machine. Someone now stands by the sinks on the factory floor entry point, checking everyone complies with our normal handwashing procedure. As a food factory a lot of this is standard practice anyway - just ramped up and compliance endured. "Some lines have been de-listed, concentrating on products that are or can be frozen. Those orders have tripled and there is overtime to complete them. People currently undergoing cancer treatment or with underlying conditions have been told to self-isolate. We seem to be taking more precautions for the staff than any of the stores."

### Scott Jones, Usdaw member and former Tesco worker and shop steward talks about rationing:

"Many shop and supermarket shelves are being stripped of hand wash, toilet rolls and some food lines such as dry pasta, as people panic buy and stockpile. "When I worked for Tesco in Wales and the local area had bad snow, the traditional rush for milk and bread took place. It meant many people couldn't buy any. Concerned, staff proposed a solution of limiting the amount individuals could buy. As the trade union shop steward I took the suggestion to management, but was told it wasn't really in the company's interest - that interest being profit. We can't rely on the bosses to manage distribution of essential goods.

"The government has put its full trust in retail bosses, with Tory minister Oliver Dowden saying "we are confident that supermarkets have the supply chains necessary to keep shelves stocked." He's clearly never worked in a supermarket! Supply chains work on a very short-term basis, and a few days' interruption could leave stores empty."