

'NON-ESSENTIAL RETAIL - FIGHT TO PROTECT WORKERS' LIVELIHOODS

Ryan Aldred, Usdaw Plymouth and District Branch Secretary (personal capacity)

With all non-essential shops being closed after the government announcement on Monday 23rd March questions by displaced and furloughed workers are quickly boiling to the surface. As the effects of the lockdown begin to impact on those workers who fall outside of the key food and grocery sectors those questions must be responded to by the labour movement.

Already we've seen the likes of Malcolm Healey, billionaire owner of Wren Kitchens, make huge lay-offs nationally using the bogus justification of underperformance in a thinly veiled bid to pre-emptively cut costs in the aftermath of the Coronavirus outbreak. In this instance, it has been a move specifically targeting workers who have worked with the company less than two years and who don't therefore qualify for full employment rights.

Changes made under the Con-Dem coalition government extended the qualifying period

for full employment rights from one to two years. We say that full employment rights should be in place on the first day of the job. Furthermore, all workers laid off in the aftermath of this crisis should be immediately reinstated and compensated for loss of earnings.

Moreover, Rishi Sunak, the Tories new Chancellor has claimed that the government "will work with trade unions and business groups to urgently develop new forms of employment support to help protect people's jobs and incomes through this period."

Trade union leaders should jump on this false platitude and demand the reversal of all anti-trade union laws, reinstate sectoral collective bargaining whilst calling on the government to pay workers in full.

According to Sunak "I am placing no limit on the amount of funding available for the [job retention] scheme" Why then, are workers getting a 20% pay dock for a crisis which we have not created?

In a bid to keep the cogs turning many retailers are focusing on keeping their online ordering service running at all costs. It



Workers in non-essential retail should join a union and get organised to defend their rights

is imperative that workers join unions like Usdaw, the GMB and Unite and form health and safety committees to ensure that the bosses aren't putting profits above workers' safety.

Where personal protective equipment (PPE) isn't being provided or social distancing regulations aren't being implemented workers should down tools. Don't let the bosses flout the laws which even this Tory government have had to concede.

Likewise, if bosses want to as-

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Has your workplace implemented the following?

Social distancing within stores, warehouses and factories of 2m, scrap performance targets

Hand sanitiser and PPE available for all workers

Screens at checkouts, kiosk and customer service counters

Regular deep cleaning of stores, warehouses and factories

Regular health and safety meetings including elected reps from the workforce

If not, get together with others workers in your workplace and demand management acts!

Join the union and help us organise for

- Full pay for all workers self-isolating or laid off from day one - no to forcing staff to use holidays

- 35 hour working week with no loss of pay

- £15 an hour minimum wage and hazard pay

- Increase staffing levels in store to carry out any necessary cleaning & hygiene duties, bring back in house outsourced cleaners

- Scrap the 2 year qualifying period - Full employment rights from day one

- Full time contracts to all those who want them

- Time and a half for all overtime worked over contracted hours

- Reinstated lost paid breaks and premium payments, double pay on Sundays and time and a half on Saturdays

- Trade union control over changing staff duties, hiring and firing, and opening time changes

- Open the books to trade union inspection if companies say they can't afford these measures

- Democratically elected committees of workers and consumers to control prices and rationing policies at all levels

TESCO'S BUMPER DIVIDEND PAYOUT

Whilst it's panic on the shopfloor for retail workers and our customers as we fight to ensure adequate measures are put in place to keep us safe, it's business as usual for Tesco management who are paying out around £635m in dividend payouts to shareholders,

6.5p per share. This compares to £585m in rates relief Tesco will be receiving from the government.

We say that the 10% hazard bonus for staff isn't enough - if Tesco can pay big amounts to shareholders, it can afford to pay staff a £15 an hour minimum wage starting right now!

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sume the extra risks on behalf of the workers, workers should respond by demanding a bigger slice of the profits. £15 an hour for all workers as well as a hazard bonus for those still working throughout the crisis. If bosses refuse, demand they open their books to trade union inspection. If they can afford bonuses for the fat cat shareholders, they can afford decent wages for the rest of us.

Many retail workers can't afford to buy a house and are trapped in the private renting sector. Rather than a simple 3 month ban on evictions which could lead to a delayed spate of revenge evictions the government should implement rent caps at genuinely affordable prices. What is to stop the government legislating rent holidays instead of effectively forcing workers to bear the brunt by writing I.O.U. notes on our behalf? Compensate landlords for loss of earnings based on proven need. Finally, it was announced earlier this week that Debenhams is on the verge of filing for administration, this is on top of Bright House and Carluccio's already having done so, a sure sign of things to come. Workers and the wider trade union movement must come together to demand

the government take ailing retail companies into public ownership. We've seen the scale of state intervention this government has already undertaken to rescue the FTSE 100, let's see it being put to use for us the workers who really keep the economy running.

- **Join a Trade Union!**
- **Scrap the two-year qualifying period – full employment rights from day one on the job**
- **Immediate reinstatement of all workers being unnecessarily laid off – compensation to be paid for loss of earnings**
- **Scrap the 20% pay dock! – Furloughed workers to receive 100% pay**
- **Form Health and Safety committees to safeguard all workers**
- **Prepare for walkouts if PPE and rigorously enforced social distancing measures aren't implemented**
- **£15 an hour minimum wage and a hazard bonus for those still working**
- **Bosses to open the books to trade union inspection – let's see who can and can't afford higher wages for workers!**
- **Introduce rent caps and rent holidays – landlords to be compensated on proven need**
- **Nationalise companies that fall into financial difficulty – spare jobs not shareholders**

The view from the shopfloor



A warehouse worker

“Too little, too late” is ringing in many workers' ears. In my workplace, a food distribution centre, it definitely echoes. A worker on the morning shift, who had been with the company decades, was recently confirmed to have the virus. It took until last week for management to make some minimal, last-minute provisions. Hand gel stations were put in just days ago. Not all equipment is sterilised. Smoking areas are cramped, and bike sheds are not allowed to be used for smoking.

The company has liquidated certain product chains to focus on high-demand goods. Bosses are dragging their heels with health and safety - but sprinting towards recruitment drives. We have an intake of hundreds of new starters over the next few weeks. Agency workers are to be trained in clusters of ten. Social distancing is not enforced during training. A collective worry is that coronavirus carriers could already have infected co-workers, or even people receiving the food.

Messages are regularly sent to staff via Tannoy and wrist trackers to thank us for our hard work during the crisis. But like the recent hand-clap for NHS staff, it raises the question of how workers in

essential sectors are really treated at this time.

Although performance measurement has been quietly suspended for directly employed workers, the agency workers are not told this.

The bosses have offered us a 10% pay rise. We should bite into this - with lockjaw! But let's remember that a couple of months ago they offered us a below-inflation 1.8% insult in wage negotiations. This was promptly rejected by over 90% of balloted workers.

Managers have left the shopfloor and stay holed up in the office. Notices displayed outside tell workers to only enter when called. Even then we are separated from management by a glass window with speakers attached. Tensions seem to be sharpening recently. If the bosses won't guarantee hygiene, their firms should be nationalised to keep us safe. The lost time is blood on the hands of the capitalists and their system.”

went as far as altering the timesheet, declaring that all workers had done their week's hours by Wednesday to ensure that nobody lost pay. Workers' anger at how they have been treated by the bosses won't be forgotten when this lockdown is over.”

Defend Vilma Alvarez - Chilean Retail Workers Leader

Like in Britain, Chilean retail workers are facing dangerous working conditions on the one hand, and threats to the continued existence of their jobs in the face of the Coronavirus. In response to this situation, the Pinera government, which faced mass protests over the past period has sought to make workers pay for this crisis, in particular through a new law which allows suspensions of contractual obligations to workers and paying them only 10% of their wages.

Vilma Alvarez, President of the Jumbo Portal La Dehesa union, has been at the heart of the struggle to defend workers interests, author-

izing a legal challenge to the threat to their health that Jumbo workers have been exposed to through the failure to implement social distancing in store, and raising the question of generalized strike action to fight the new law. It seems that for this, Vilma has been threatened with censure and expulsion from the trade union federation she is a National Board member of, moved by the President of that federation, a right-winger and supporter of the so-called Socialist Party of Chile. In the crisis situation putting retail workers in difficult working conditions, it is vital that militant workers representatives are defended.



Usdaw members should send letters of protest in defence of Vilma and offering solidarity with the struggles of retail workers in Chile. In a number of countries, including Chile, we have seen walkouts by workers to demand measures to protect their health or to shutdown inessential workplaces.

If the governments lockdown measures are prolonged here, it

is entirely possible we could see a much harder line than at present from retail employers and government towards our members like what is being adopted in Chile at present. It is vital trade unions remain an organization independent of our employers and government to defend our interests and those of our customers against their need to put profits first.

Please send letters of protest to Presidencia@coordinadoradelcomercio.cl; Comunicaciones@coordinadoradelcomercio.cl; Secretaria@coordinadoradelcomercio.cl and send copies to vilmalvarez@gmail.com and Sindicatojumbola-dehesa@gmail.com