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theActivist

the bulletin of  members in *Usdaw*

CAMPAIGN TO SHUT SHOPS ON BOXING DAY



Christmas is the least favourite time of the year in work for most retail workers. Stores jam packed with extra customers, extra stock and often no ability to book any time off in the couple of weeks running up to Christmas make this an extremely stressful period of time for workers on or just above the minimum wage.

Apart from wanting to spend time with family and friends, there are also additional difficulties with working over this period due to public transport having more limited timetables making getting in to work much more difficult.

While all shops have to be legally closed on Christmas Day, many open on Boxing Day, with around 365,000 people in retail working on Boxing Day 2014.

A recent Usdaw survey showed that only a tiny 1.5% of retail workers were happy to work on Boxing Day, while a huge 93% definitely don't want to be in work that day.

Despite this clear demand from retail workers,

Usdaw's position is somewhat tame. While calling for workers to be allowed Boxing Day and New Year's Day off, as well as closures by 4pm on Christmas Eve and New Years Eve, Usdaw is not calling for any changes in shop trading hours legislation.

This might be an acceptable position if the union was having a successful industrial campaign for this demand. However, apart from some individual stores, the major supermarket chains where the bulk of Usdaw members work are open on Boxing Day, and it is the un-unionised stores like Lidl and Aldi which are shut. Not only does this position let Usdaw members down, it doesn't help recruit non-unionised workers either.

While the Activist supports closing shops on Boxing Day, New Years Day and earlier closing times on days prior to days prior to holidays (including Easter as well as the Christmas period), this should be part of a wider debate about the working hours and pay of retail workers.

Recent labour saving devices implemented in retail such as self-scan checkouts and automated cash counting have led to job losses rather than a redistribution of the remaining work to give workers a shorter working week with no loss of pay.

The major supermarket companies are interested in their own profits above anything else – the longer open hours they can stretch out of staff (preferably paid as little as possible) then the more possibilities for extra sales that can be made at the expense of their rivals. Usdaw should not be in a partnership with these companies which means dancing to their tune. It should be fighting for the interests of its members, and for taking the major retail companies out of the hands of greedy profiteers and bring them into public ownership where the needs of retail workers for decent pay, working hours and holidays could be prioritised.

■ Solidarity with Usdaw members striking at Weetabix

Weetabix workers have voted to strike in dispute over shift patterns, the Usdaw members backed industrial action by 9-1, with stoppages to take place at Corby and Kettering sites in the new year on a turnout of almost 70%. Each strike will run for 24 hours, with no more than one stoppage in a single week.

■ The Activist Inbox

I recently spoke to a worker at a Two Sisters plant, a company where the bakers' union BFAWU has this year taken strike action against the removal of premium payments at a number of plants.

The story he told was of a company making brutal attacks on the conditions of its workers to boost its turnover.

Staff buses to work have been canceled from all the nearby towns so workers have to use their own transport to come into work. But extending the car park to accommodate this would have cut into profits, so many workers have to find side streets to park on.

The staff canteen was recently closed to make way for a new massive chiller to be installed. Now staff have to use a canteen in a Portakabin that is too small to fit everyone in! (Which has also reduced the car park size even further!)

The chiller, of course, was fitted to allow even more livestock to be filleted at the plant. But as the worker I spoke to said: "The rate they want us to work at isn't humanly possible, someone is bound to have an accident sooner or later."

Two Sisters group is determined to squeeze workers even more to boost its profits. The only thing that will challenge that is a strongly organised trade union movement.

Usdaw should be seeking to link up with the baker's union to challenge the Two Sisters management and fight for minimal bench line of conditions including staff transport to work and adequate parking and canteen facilities, as well as defending pay premiums and a minimum hourly wage of £10 an hour which is the policy of both unions.

David Ingham

Lidl workers boosted to the 'real' living wage



Over past few years, Aldi and Lidl have become growing powers in the battle between the major supermarket chains, cutting into the market share of the 'Big 4' with their cheap goods.

Part of the latest ploy in this battle has been Lidl pledging to increase pay rates to match the living wage set by the Living Wage Foundation (as opposed to the government's 'National Living Wage' which is in effect a new tier of the minimum wage).

Both Lidl and Aldi have for some time generally paid higher rates of pay than the other major supermarket chains, whose basic pay rates have generally tracked just above the minimum wage rate. Even now with the government's 'living wage' at £7.20 an hour, then

pay at Tesco, the highest of those, is £7.39 an hour. Additionally in recent wage negotiations to get slightly higher rates, then Usdaw's negotiators have been prepared to recommend the loss of hard fought for terms and conditions including paid breaks and unsocial hours payments. Lidl will instead be paying £8.20 per hour and Aldi £8.15 per hour.

There are numerous factors in play as to why this is the case, being in un-unionised workplaces, the instances of workers being messed around with shifts is likely to be higher. Although not unknown in unionised retail stores, quotes from a recent Usdaw survey highlight the problem, including "The rota always changes without consent and we get sent home early when they want

to save on hours," and "You never finish your shift on time, sometimes it's one or two hours later." Moreover stores are generally sparsely staffed, with Aldi requiring very fast scan rates. Whilst Aldi has paid breaks, Lidl doesn't offer these.

In previous articles, the Activist has also analysed the business model of 'the discounters' as opposed to the major supermarkets which is an additional factor.

But whilst £8.20 is higher than other supermarkets, trade unionists should not be taken in by the claim that this represents a 'living wage'. The TUC and other unions including Usdaw demand a £10 an hour minimum wage on the basis that this would lift people out of the need to claim in-work benefits. This also should be linked to question of guaranteed full time working hours to those who wish to work them.

Usdaw should be highlighting this shortfall as one of its key selling points to Lidl staff, and indeed all in the retail sector. The participation of Usdaw in the recent 'Sheffield for Ten' demonstration, including its North Eastern Divisional Secretary speaking, is a welcome step in the right direction. But this sort of campaigning between trade unionists should be replicated in every major town and city.

Iain Dalton

Premium pay cuts are not just any cuts, they are M&S cuts

Marks & Spencer likes to claim that it's 'Your M&S' but since it only made a paltry £660 million profit in 2015, the company doesn't seem to have enough money to pay its staff a living wage.

Instead workers are being forced to sign a new pay and pensions contract which will mean Sunday, bank holiday and anti-social hours premium pay will be reduced. More than 2,500 shop workers will lose more than £1,000 a year as a result. Staff have been told that these pay cuts will be imposed if they do not voluntarily sign up to these changes.

The retailer said it was making the changes to help pay for a 15% increase in

basic pay for its 69,000 workers from next April to £8.50 an hour. There is currently a loophole, which made it possible for companies to make changes to staff benefits in order to offset the impact of the introduction of the legally binding National Living Wage of £7.20 an hour this April.

A number of companies, including

B&Q, Tesco and Morrisons, have raised basic pay only to cut perks and premium payments for weekend, holiday or late working.

Socialist Party members in Usdaw say there should be no cuts to pay or benefits for the staff who work in Marks & Spencer, as well as the other companies who are trying to get out of paying their staff the living wage. Instead we demand that the minimum wage should be £10 an hour with no loss of pay or benefits. Only with a fighting union and working class support can this happen.

Usdaw is one of the few unions to back Owen Smith in the Labour leadership election.

Leicester Socialist Party campaigned outside Marks & Spencer recently, alongside members of the bakers' union, BFAWU, for a £10 an hour minimum wage. Jeremy Corbyn is echoing this demand.

Usdaw members in East Midlands

