

SUPERMARKET PROFITS SOAR FROM CORONAVIRUS



Empty shelves in Tesco - a scene repeated in other supermarkets

Iain Dalton, Usdaw Broad Left Chair

Amongst all the other worries Coronavirus has thrown up over the past few weeks, retail workers will have been worried about whether it was safe to go to work. As one of the few places where large numbers of people will still gather and pass through, then the possibility of catching Coronavirus has been an ever-present worry. Although the supermarket chains have belatedly acted to implement measures to protect staff including social distancing, it is vital that we organise together to demand measures to ensure we are safe as possible. This should include implementing social distancing measures, access to hand sanitiser and PPE, screens at checkouts and regular deep cleans of stores to minimize risk to staff and customers alike. Where health and safety committees and reps

exist these should draw other workers in and demand urgent action on any issues from management, where they don't workers should organise together to establish them. 40,000 plus workers have been hired by the big supermarkets over the past few weeks. They should be on the same pay and conditions as the rest of us from day one, to stop companies playing divide and rule. It is vital that those new workers and the many currently organised workers are unionised by Usdaw and other retail sector unions to fight for this. We may be classed as 'key workers' by the government, but our pay and working conditions don't currently match the vitally important role we are playing in making sure the food supply system is still functioning.

Our hard work is leading to a big

increase in profits for our employers. The 100% rates holiday for retail means massive savings, Tesco will save £750 million in business rates, Sainsbury's £567m and Morrisons £308m. After that announcement shares in Sainsbury's went up 11.7%, Ocado 11.2% and Morrisons 10.8%. This isn't to mention the big increase in sales meaning more money passing through the checkouts!

And what do we get in return? We've seen several rounds of improvements on sick pay in relation to coronavirus, but that was from a level that regularly saw people forced to come into work ill and spread that around the workplace

Some of our employers have also announced special bonuses of around 10% for those working over the next few months.

But this is a pittance compared to their soaring profits. In some companies workers don't even reach £10 an hour, the demand that retail and distribution union Usdaw adopted back in 2016. Between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of low paid workers in the retail sector increased from 335

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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
- 35 hour working week with no loss of pay
- £15 an hour minimum wage
- 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
- Reinstate 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

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to 57%, a far bigger increase than in work in general (from 15% to 21%), combined with the attacks on premium payments, paid breaks and staffing levels over the last decade mean that we are underpaid and over worked.

We shouldn't only restore those lost terms and conditions, but be paid a wage of at least £15 an hour that recognizes the important work we do. Whilst some temporary workers may go back to other jobs, we should fight to ensure those who want to be kept on and ensure stores are properly staffed, and essential cleaning work is done at all times. We should cap the working week at 35 hours to ensure we all have time to spend with our families, whilst bringing up to full time hours any workers who want to do so, to cover any gaps in shift patterns.

The improved sick pay arrangements, of full pay whilst in self-isolation without a 3 week wait are welcome. But why aren't those the conditions we have all year round so that ill workers can get better and aren't incentivized to come in whilst ill and spread flu and other ailments around the workplace?

Given the government has said that it'll do 'whatever it takes' to deal with this crisis, why are they only guaranteeing 80% of some employees wages? 'Whatever it takes' should mean full pay with no waits until the end of April (or June currently for the self-employed!)

Many people want to ensure that 'key workers' and vulnerable groups are able to get into stores to get the essentials they need. Some MPs are even calling for Sunday trading laws to be relaxed for this, taking away the one day we have a little more control over when we're working and can spend the evening at home. But any changes to opening hours have a knock on effects on our working hours and

what duties we'd be expected to carry out, so why shouldn't any changes be made under the supervision of Usdaw reps and members who can ensure we look after the interests of both groups of key workers, those in the NHS and other sectors, but also ourselves. Wouldn't that make more sense than just being sent missives from head office regardless of the local situation?

With the huge sales then the big supermarkets can clearly afford to pay for these measures and more - if they claim they can't then workers and their unions should be demanding they open their books to inspection and demand the nationalization under democratic workers control and management of such companies.

As competition laws are suspended to allow collaboration between companies then it is clear that market competition isn't the most efficient system of distributing goods and services. Rather than multi-billion pound company bosses belatedly and arbitrarily rationing food and essential goods, this should be carried out under the supervision of democratically elected committees of workers and consumers, along with controlling prices to stop profiteering. On this basis we could plan a system to meet the food needs of people through this crisis and beyond.

■ See the Socialist Party's 'Coronavrius: A workers' charter' and many more articles providing a socialist response to the Coronavirus crisis at socialistparty.org.uk

■ Join the 'NSSN - defend workers' rights under Coronavirus' facebook group for discussion about the challenges facing workers under Coronavirus with reps and activists from across the trade union movement.

The view from the shopfloor



Many Usdaw members working in 'non-essential' retail and warehouses have faced unsafe working conditions and being laid-off. We will cover these issues more fully in the next issue of the Activist, for now we print below two reports from these sectors we have received.

An Usdaw member in one of the Next warehouses sent us the following before they were closed, with workers sent home on full pay until at least 11 April

"At my warehouse they are encouraging distancing and sanitisation. But in some areas people are still in close proximity. Other warehouses seem to be worse. There was an NNC meeting on Monday but the senior stewards are embargoed.. That night I saw an email saying along the lines of our research in countries already effected on line shopping gives people some normality. Canteen facilities are not on. They reopened them to sit and the smoke shelters after the photos went on social media. Just heard the sale is now 70%off. Do people really need new clothes when there's nowhere to go."

Adam Viteos, a Shop Worker:

"I work for one of the retail chains in Mike Ashley's empire. As more shops were closing, pressure began mounting for our chain to close too. But we were expected to lone work, rather than simply closing the shop down. Lines of communication were set up between stores so lone workers could check in regularly - as if this would somehow guarantee their safety.

This move completely backfired. It became a place for workers in different stores to come together.

The bosses have flagrant disregard for our safety. Some angry workers began sharing links to trade union websites. We would have remained open unless we were specifically told to close. Despite the government finally announcing on Monday 23 March that all non-essential shops were to close, we received emails the next morning from upper management stating that we were expected to work until at least Friday.

Staff safety was put a firm second behind 'securing' stock. Workers were expected to come in and ship stock back to head office. None of us received personal protective equipment. We were specifically instructed that workers who aren't self-isolating and refuse to work will have their pay docked.

We were told that only a certain number of people were allowed in stores, but simultaneously the company still expected all staff to turn up. At my shop, a skeleton crew agreed to carry out what the company deemed "essential lockdown procedures" and we had everything done by Wednesday. My manager had been one of the most hostile and antagonistic to any union presence. But they have u-turned, and 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."



Many warehouses, like this Amazon, aren't implement social distancing