

WHAT SORT OF EXIT FROM LOCKDOWN MEASURES WILL BENEFIT RETAIL WORKERS?



Scott Jones, Usdaw member

Unlike many parts of the economy and society, retail hasn't entirely shut down during lockdown so there are some glimpses of how retail will look. But the breadth and variety of stores and companies that make up our high streets and shopping centres raise questions and many of the issues thrown up for supermarkets remain.

Usdaw, the shop and distribution union, has worked with the retail bosses' organisation the British Retail Consortium to produce "a guide for retailers on how to implement government advice" on social distancing, aimed mainly at non-food retail stores which have been closed for the last six weeks. The guide (usdaw.org.uk/BRC-guide) simply lays out what the current government advice is and goes into some useful details on how it can be implemented. However, missing from the guide and accompanying statement is recognition how and where company's have failed workers in protecting them and concrete demands on companies to comply.

Workers in stores that have remained open have raised issues on availability of PPE, issues with till screens, social distancing and more. These issues remain in many stores and will be com-

pounded as shops reopen, particularly in smaller high street stores which are mainly non-unionised. Other issues which must be considered too are how changed shopping times and habits affect workers and their terms and conditions and what support for workers at retailers which will struggle to reopen because of financial difficulties and subsequent cuts and closures.

And workers and their trade unions are key to ensuring a safe exit strategy for retail workers. As reported in the Activist and the Socialist newspaper bosses only care about profits. One B&M worker told us: "In the rush to sell as much as possible, health and safety is going out the window. We've had cages blocking fire exits so people can restock quicker. The cleaner in store had to self-isolate, yet for days no-one replaced her. Our till screens are next to useless. They are free standing but they keep falling and hitting the cashiers on the head. It's been reported to management but nothing is being done."

This issue was again graphically highlighted just last week when over a dozen workers at Home Bargains store in South Shields bravely walked out in response to their management unilaterally lifting social distancing measures - within hours they were rapidly

reimplemented with the company nationally claiming they were never lifted. However, the press has since reported the company has brought in additional signage explaining social distancing measures to customers as they enter stores - a clear example of how workers can push management back if they collectively organise, even in currently non-union stores.

Such methods of relaxing the amount of customers allowed in store at any one time are a clear attempt to maximise profits. If, after lockdown, current stores are not able to cope with customer numbers and ensure social distancing at the same time then empty retail space should be used to open new stores if necessary.

Workplace safety is not safe in the hands of the bosses or their organisations like the British Retail Consortium and political representatives - the Tory government. We need democratic trade union oversight of all measures and the exit.

That means more members, more reps, meetings taking place, democratic control by members. And until the measures set out by workers and trade unions are met by employers then shops should remain closed - with no loss of pay and jobs.

And as well as ensuring a safe return to work, Usdaw is right to demand 'A New Deal for Workers', calling for better pay and improved conditions for retail workers. But Usdaw needs to go even further, particularly on pay, we demand a £15 an hour minimum. We need an exit strategy not just from lockdown but from low pay, unsafe working conditions, zero-hour contracts and all the horrors of our profit-driven capitalist system.

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. Full time contracts to all those who want them
- Scrap the 2 year qualifying period - Full employment rights from day one
- Scrap performance targets
- 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. No extension of Sunday trading
- Trade union control over changing staff duties, hiring and firing, and opening time changes
- No lifting of any social distancing measures without agreement from elected local health and safety committees/ reps
- 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

Join Usdaw - usdaw.org.uk/join

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The view from the shopfloor



A Sainsbury's online delivery driver

Since the beginning of the outbreak, delivery drivers have been at the forefront of carrying out an essential role in providing access to food to vulnerable people – those most at risk - who are self isolating. In the beginning we were expected still to deliver the same service, protection free, to households. Sainsburys was behind the rest of the sector in applying updated health and safety policies and protections for its delivery drivers. Whilst we welcome USDAW raising issues after surveys about the safety of its members and the workforce, this crisis has shown the need for a fundamental shift in the nature and character of the union in fighting for its members.

USDAW needs to be on the shop floor, engaging with its members, bringing them together in a collective and empowering effort to fight for better working conditions and better pay. Whilst Sainsburys, eventually, after several weeks did introduce a stable policy wherein finally drivers were not expected to enter households, nor accept returned goods or customer signatures, this failure to listen and to act quickly was unacceptable. USDAW'S failure to engage with its members and push for these demands from the very start, with real force, was unacceptable.

The need for key workers during this outbreak of COVID-19 has highlighted the role many in the working class play in sustaining the country. For delivery drivers it should highlight the essential role we play not only during a crisis such as the one we now live through, but the essential role we have always played. We have been carrying out a vital public service for a very long time. This service provides access to food for the elderly and the disabled to those unable to afford social care services, those perhaps without family members able to provide the care they so desperately need and deserve. We provide a brief break from isolation for all in the outbreak, but we have always

provided that brief break from isolation and loneliness that some of our most vulnerable members of society face all the time.

Sainsburys pledged to filter its online services to provide specifically for the disabled and over 70s; this decision came after the huge surge in demand for deliveries left many unable to obtain a delivery slot for weeks at a time. For the first week this worked but soon after people began to figure out work arounds such as using an elderly relatives card details and information to create an account. Thus people began ordering not only for themselves, but for other extended family members and neighbours per delivery. This has led to huge increase in work, where most long shifts require a second trip back to the depot to restock the vans with more shopping to deliver. Individual deliveries have doubled in quantity, meaning an excess in physical labour through the distribution chain. Now we are told "the needs of the business" require us go later than our final 9pm until 10pm slots, with our working hours being extended so we now will cater to 10pm until 11pm slots.

With a paltry 10 percent bonus to its employees, Sainsburys has in fact extended the business with its surplus profit, hiring agency workers across the board to increase the capacity of bookings and uptake. The rush to capitalise on the surge for demand has led to the employment of drivers without proper training and safety checks using the excuse of social distancing to allow drivers to simply "phone in" answers to a trainer, rather than be taught, observed and assessed over several weeks by an established trainer.

This excess in quick, cheap and contractually insecure labour now threatens the ability for long term employees to openly question and act against the working conditions and real danger in the face of Covid-19. The need for an organised, strong and militant trade union is needed now more than ever but USDAW, with its non-confrontation-

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THE INCREASE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST SHOP WORKERS?

Iain Dalton, Usdaw Broad Left Chair

Usdaw's Covid-19 survey revealed some shocking figures, but none more so than the doubling of the rate of incidents of assault, threats and abuse since 2019. In the survey, which had just under 5,000 responses from shopworkers, 196 reported being assaulted, 1,426 threatened, and 3,069 abused. No worker should go to work and receive abuse or violence simply for doing their job.

Undoubtedly, beyond the usual flashpoints for abuse, such as age-restricted products, then new ones have arisen as a result of the Covid-19 crisis – such as restricting numbers entering stores and enforcing limits on purchases.

But the question of what to do about these issues is immediately posed. The main measure put forward by Usdaw is the bringing in of a specific laws against abusing, threatening or assaulting a front-line worker. Alongside campaigning for increased police numbers, Usdaw has lobbied for such legislation in recent years, alongside other unions, particularly ones representing emergency service workers, which would have much higher penalties than the already existing laws around assault and abuse. But this alone will not deal with the immediate threats to workers, which are happening daily and cannot wait for such legislation.

The approach of the big retailers and their local management also play a key role in whether such

abusive behaviour is tolerated. Low staffing levels create situations where abuse and violence are more likely, in 'normal' times through single person operation of convenience and other small shops, often at nights, but also in implementing social distancing policies. One worker dealing with massive queues outside shops will struggle far more to keep order and explain what is going on to people, than a team of staff that can fully deal with issues.

Stores relaxing social distancing regulations in pursuit of increased profits, as reports suggest some stores did around Easter, or more recently, Home Bargains in South Shields did leading to a walkout of at least a dozen workers before rapidly re-implementing them and claiming nothing had happened, will undermine the confidence of shoppers that such policies are necessary to keep staff safe.

Ultimately, our safety is secondary to whether companies can make profits, whether at board level, or on the pressure exerted on local managers through the budgets they are allocated by central office.

Usdaw should be campaigning for additional staffing to ensure all cleaning and safety measures needed can be fully carried out, but the best way to do this is to empower members in stores to make demands on management and take collective action to implement it, establishing local health and safety committees, including elected reps alongside other workers, to discuss these issues.

al, collaborationist approach is not only missing the boat but letting the workforce down. Trade unionists now more than ever need to organise at the grass roots level to change the nature of the union whilst simultaneously organising their often overlooked fellow employees.



the **Activist**
No to extending Sunday trading in retail - retail workers deserve a break

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