



members in *Usdaw*



Militant Left
FOR WORKERS UNITY AND A SOCIALIST FUTURE
IRELAND

Don't let the festive season be one of misery for retail workers

Ryan Aldred, Usdaw South Wales & Western Executive Council candidate

The three days leading up to the England-wide lockdown were a taste of things to come with shoppers flooding to the high street to squeeze in Christmas shopping.

The announcement of a second lockdown came after months of the Tories mishandling the pandemic, leading to a deadly second wave of coronavirus. Yet, despite his proclamation that "we must act now" the second lockdown was initiated four days after the announcement leading to a frenzied rush to the shops to stock up for the holiday season.

Undoubtedly, bosses in retail will be keen to throw their doors wide open on December 2nd as they try to claw back lost revenue, and many shops are intending on opening for 24 hours a day after the government announced it would relax opening rules in England.

During the first UK wide lockdown businesses were keen to show how "responsible" they were by introducing customer limits and implementing government guidelines on Covid secure workplaces. On paper, the guidance issued jointly by the British Retail Consortium and Usdaw, looked like it should protect retail workers - but without the union using its collective strength to monitor and enforce these rules, then they

simply remained just pieces of paper as companies eyed up their bottom lines.

Over the last few months, we have seen shops getting more and more lax at implementing such measures, meaning that shopworkers are put at increased risk. Supposedly "safe" store capacity levels have been subject to inflation through the pandemic, leading to supermarkets now being the leading place for Covid transmissions. Though the 24 hour openings are supposed to reduce overcrowding in the run up to Xmas, none of those opening 24 hours have announced plans to lower capacity limits!

This shows the short-sighted nature of the 'tripartite' approach of 'partnership' with the employers and Tory government that Usdaw General Secretary Paddy Lillis seems to promote on every occasion. Over the last few weeks, the Activist has received numerous reports from lay members and union reps about store capacities being dramatically increased, and when this has been raised with the union it is treated as an individual store issue, not something to collectively tackle within these companies or across the sector.

Instead of leaving union reps to effectively fend for themselves, the collective strength of the union should be brought to bear through a trade union led campaign over workplace safety, with health and safety reps and committee signing off on

safety measures including store capacities.

Such measures will be justified by the bosses saying that otherwise they could go under. With companies such as Arcadia group (including Topshop, Miss Selfridges) and Edinburgh Woolen Mills (including Peacocks) having fallen into administration and Debenhams ceasing trading, then this is a real threat.

In the first instance these companies should turn over their books to trade union inspection to ensure that they're not simply trying to protect the shareholders at the expense of the workers. If companies are genuinely struggling they should be brought into public ownership to protect jobs. Such a demand should be included in Usdaw's new deal for workers campaign as it is already union policy.

Usdaw is the fifth largest trade union in Britain with close to 400,000 members with hundreds of thousands more shop, distributive and allied workers desperately in need of trade union organisation. By building an audacious campaign to defend jobs, fight for decent pay including hazard pay and unsocial hours premium payments, and demand workers control and management of safety whilst developing a strategy of public ownership to overcome the looming crisis in retail, thousands more could be won to Usdaw to enthusiastically take up the fight.

Join the union and help us organise for

- No lifting of any Covid measures without agreement from elected local health & safety committees/reps
- Full pay for all workers self-isolating or furloughed from day one - no to forcing staff to use holidays
- An immediate £12/hour minimum wage as a step to £15 + 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
- 35 hour working week without loss of pay
- Open the books to trade union inspection if companies say they can't afford these measures
- Bailout workers, not the bosses and the speculators. Campaign for nationalisation to save jobs.
- Democratically elected committees of workers and consumers to control prices and any rationing policies at all levels.
- For socialist planning to put the needs of workers first, not shareholders profits.

Join Usdaw - usdaw.org.uk/join

Join the fightback

JOIN THE SOCIALISTS

- England & Wales socialistparty.org.uk
- Scotland socialistpartyscotland.org.uk
- Ireland militant-left.org



Sainsburys & Argos - Cuts, closures and soaring sales?

The news of over 3,000 job cuts, closures of Sainsbury's meat, fish and deli counters as well as the closures of 420 standalone Argos stores, alongside posting a £137m loss for the half year to end of September will have been a bombshell to many Sainsbury's and Argos workers.

Like all the major supermarkets - Sainsbury's had seen surges in sales under lockdown, from the initial 'panic-buying' surge through to competitors in non-food sales being closed. Like for like retail sales are up by 6.9% as a result. Despite lockdown, sales in Argos (whose standalone stores had to shut as non-essential) have risen by 11%.

Many of the supermarkets have talked about additional spending due to the pandemic, in Sainsbury's case this is around £290m, yet this additional spending was largely offset by business rates relief of £230m.

When the figures are examined further, then even with a loss of £55m from its banking business, Sainsbury's group underlying profit has actually increased

by 26% up to £301m for the half year. It's the statutory profit, ie the underlying profit adjusted by one off costs in which a loss has been registered for the year.

Yet over that same half year, Sainsbury's have reduced net debt by £610m. Moreover, they're paying out both a special dividend for the delayed 2019/20 financial year, plus a dividend for the current half-year period as well!

So if all of this can be afforded from this half-year's income, why then make these cutbacks? It's simply that having lived without keeping these counters and stores open for part or all of the last 6 months, Sainsbury's bosses have decided they don't need these and the workers who staff them to keep pilling on the profits.

Undoubtedly, this has been reinforced by 90% of Argos sales now being received digitally (although this includes collecting in store), up from 61% a year ago.

Another key part of the proposals is plans to close meat, fish and deli counters in store. Unfortunately, both of

the unions recognised in Sainsbury's have released statements which seem to accept the closures of counters as largely inevitable, reconciling themselves that many workers could be redeployed into the expanding home delivery services and infrastructure. But why accept such closures as inevitable?

It's true that in recent years, faced with the growth of discounters Lidl and Aldi, that many of the big supermarkets have attempted to copy parts of their model, which includes cutting costs wherever possible, including not having staffed counters. Whilst retaining meat and fish counters, Tesco have already used this crisis to shut their deli counters.

Yet counters offer a far precise portion size than pre-packed products ever can, as well as advice for shoppers and the opportunity to speak to someone face-to-face, which for some, especially elderly shoppers, is welcome.

Why couldn't the retail unions link up with customers in their local communities to build a campaign to save counter services? With redundancy notices not coming into effect

until March next year, then there is time to build such a campaign.

Likewise, in their retail industrial strategy, Usdaw championed a 'bricks and clicks' approach to expanding online retail, which would see physical stores maintained as an important part of infrastructure for returns etc. But this will not happen by wishful thinking or asking retail bosses nicely, if such a strategy is to be pursued then the union must organise a fight for this in the here and now.

More than ever, a co-ordinated approach is needed from the unions representing Sainsbury's and Argos staff, Usdaw and Unite. Currently, neither has full collective bargaining rights within the company, and the Sainsbury's bosses play each union off against each other - this has to end.

There should be joint meetings called of Sainsbury's and Argos workers in both unions to discuss the situation urgently and develop a strategy to fight to defend these jobs.

Richie Venton: Active Campaign Forces Payout

After 2 months of campaigning outside IKEA stores across the country, the campaign against the victimisation of Usdaw EC member and union rep, Richie Venton, has won its second success. Ahead of an employment tribunal which Richie finally got Usdaw support for his case at, the

employer offered a payout ahead of the trial - a likely sign that they felt Richie had a legitimate case to challenge them on.

This is a vindication for all Usdaw members and the wider trade union movement which has supported Richie, coming after IKEA dropped

their planned attacks on sick pay back when news of Richie's victimisation broke in late August.

However, given the preparedness of Usdaw members in Richie's store to take strike action, then more could have been won, if Usdaw's leadership around

Paddy Lillis had given active support to the campaign from the beginning.

As it is, IKEA management have still managed to sack a member of Usdaw's executive council, meaning that companies could use similar tactics to remove other prominent union activists.