

UK: Asda supermarket workers protest inferior contract

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Hundreds of Asda supermarket workers rallied and marched Wednesday in Leeds, where the company is headquartered, despite the pouring rain. The rally was to oppose the imposition of a new contract that negatively impacts tens of thousands of employees.

Many will lose hundreds of pounds annually due to the ending of paid breaks. Working bank holidays and weekends is made compulsory along with more flexible hours across any department. Staff with decades at Asda will lose accumulated extra days holiday. The changes are in return for a meagre rise in basic pay from £8.21 or £8.84 an hour to just £9 an hour.

Workers have been told that they have until midnight November 2 to sign the contracts or be sacked. A significant minority of workers have refused to sign and are now on a 12-week notice period to leave.

Asda, one of the dominant “Big Four” supermarkets, is a subsidiary of US-based global retailer Walmart, owned by the super-rich Walton family, who are worth \$191 billion.

The protest was called by the GMB trade union, the only union that Asda recognises in the UK. Asda employs more than 100,000 and workers came to the protest from across the UK, including over 100 from Scotland and Wales. They assembled for a rally in Leeds City Square before marching to Asda’s headquarters a short distance away. Workers chanted slogans including, “Your choice is no choice,” “Shame on you” and “No ifs, no buts, no Asda cuts.”

When the march reached Asda’s HQ, where around 2,500 are employed, workers chanted slogans for around 10 minutes, including warning, “You are next.” HQ staff have already felt the brunt of Asda’s “streamlining” when 300 office jobs were axed in 2017.

Despite the protest being entirely peaceful, police

officers from West Yorkshire Police were mobilised and issued Section 12 and Section 14 notices under the 1986 Public Order Act. Under Section 12, police have the power to move people away from an area, using force if necessary. Under Section 14 police can impose strict conditions on a static protest.

Asda issued a statement insisting that the contracts would be imposed as the “retail sector is undergoing significant change and it is important that we are able to keep pace with these changes.” This was a reference to the three other main supermarket chains—Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons—who are all imposing similar restructuring programmes aimed at cutting labour costs.

Asda’s workers are facing this devastating situation due to fact that the GMB agreed to the contract being brought in on a “voluntary” basis two years ago and have refused to mount any serious fight since then.

Such was the leeway provided by the union that the vast majority of Asda’s workforce (90,000) have now signed the contract, in fear for their jobs and livelihoods. Instances have been reported in the media of Asda managers turning up at some workers’ homes, even while they were on sick leave, to insist they sign. One worker with a terminally ill husband signed the contract, stating that she could not deal with the stress any longer.

Asda were given impetus in this drive by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) retail workers union, which represents Asda workers in Northern Ireland. In April, Asda issued a statement proposing “to move all its hourly-paid retail colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales to a new, standardised contract that would streamline the supermarket’s existing six different contract types to one,” stressing, “Similar proposals were recently voted on in Northern

Ireland as part of a collective bargaining agreement, where they were recommended for approval by union USDAW ...”

At the rally, GMB bureaucrats, including General Secretary Tim Roache, ramped up the rhetoric to portray themselves as waging a titanic fight to oppose the contract. Roache declared, “If GMB was organising Sainsbury’s, Tesco or anywhere else where they’re trying to impose these unfair, punitive contracts we’d oppose it there just like here in Asda.”

Roache said this even as he admitted, “I was the one who agreed two years ago with Asda that these contracts should be totally voluntary.” Instead of any fight being waged against the company and a mobilisation of its 615,000 members, Roache called for a return to the Asda “of the good old days, before Walmart came along.”

As with all the major unions, the GMB has massive resources that have never been made available to wage a struggle. In 2017, it brought in nearly £66 million in dues income from its members. Roache rakes in a £150,000 salary, plus expenses.

Speaking alongside the GMB officials was Richard Burgon, the Labour MP for Leeds East, who is a close supporter of the party’s nominally “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn. He presented himself as the justice secretary in “Jeremy Corbyn’s alternative government.”

Burgon didn’t oppose on principle the drive by corporations to impose flexible contracts across the board, stating only that “flexibility has got to be a two-way street.” Burgon, a GMB-sponsored MP who is secretary of the union’s Parliamentary Group, and Corbyn have done nothing to mobilise Labour’s hundreds of thousands of members against Asda’s contract or the deregulation of the UK’s workforce being spearheaded by the supermarkets and other employers such as Amazon and Sports Direct. Corbyn merely issued a tweet the evening before the rally, calling on Asda to “get round the table with the GMB union and listen to the hardworking staff who make the business a success.”

All Burgon could say to workers at the protest was that they should wait for a Corbyn Labour government that “will introduce a national minimum wage of at least £10 an hour.” The union bureaucracy, who have suppressed every single movement of the working class over the last decade, allowing the government and

employers to impose crushing levels of austerity, job cuts and speed-ups, would play a critical role in a “real partnership” in a Corbyn government, Burgon pledged.

The rally underscored the necessity for workers to take the struggle to defend their terms, conditions and livelihoods out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. This means creating democratic rank-and-file committees, based on the fight for a socialist programme to mobilise retail workers at supermarket chains in Britain and internationally who confront the same attacks.

The author also recommends:

UK supermarket worker: “The ‘choice’ from Asda is no choice—you sign or you’re out of a job”
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