

Redundant Thomas Cook workers speak out at Manchester jobs fair

Our reporters
5 October 2019

Following the collapse of UK holiday giant Thomas Cook, hundreds of workers who have lost their jobs in Britain attended a day-long jobs fair Thursday at the Runway Visitors' Centre at Manchester's Airport.

Britain's largest package tour operator folded overnight in the early hours of September 23 after a failed attempt to secure funding, including government investment, to keep the firm afloat. Of the total 9,000 jobs lost in the UK, 3,000 went in Manchester—where the firm is headquartered—and the surrounding North West of England.

The airline companies in attendance at the fair included TUI, Jet2.com and British Airways. Among the many other companies that sent representatives were travel brands Hilton and Mercure Hotels. Other companies in attendance included McDonald's, Whitbreads, United Utilities, Network Rail, The Co-op, Booking.com. Bupa, Vodaphone, Metrolink and Swissport. The Citizens Advice Bureau, the Airport Academy and Jobcentre Plus also attended to offer services to former Thomas Cook and supply chain employees. According to organisers, around 5,000 jobs were on offer.

WSWS reporters spoke to the company's former employees attending the fair and gave them copies of the article "The mounting human cost of the Thomas Cook collapse."

Lorraine explained how she first heard the devastating news. "I was at home. I was working the next day, on a course... preparing for that course. I found out at 2 a.m. in the morning. It was all on Sky News. I worked there for 32 years. Someone takes your job away after 32 years, it's atrocious. It was like your world was falling apart. Your whole life has gone, no job, no money, with no notice. [The bosses] got their bonuses but we didn't receive our last monthly pay."

Lorraine said, "We're stressed by it, we are shocked. It's not what we expected, it's not what we were told. We were told all year there were investors. There was a shortfall to the banks, but something could have been saved." Regarding the multi-million-pound salaries and massive bonuses received by top management when the company was in difficulty she found this "very upsetting."

Jim expressed his anger and frustration at losing his job a second time round after the collapse of Monarch airline in 2017, which led to 1,800 job losses and the flights and holidays of about 860,000 people being cancelled.

"I'd been at Monarch for 17 years and they did this to me two years ago! I've just had heart surgery five months ago and I was on a phased return to work. I'd been at Thomas Cook for three years and now I'm f—g skint."

Debbie, who worked for Thomas Cook for twenty-two and a half years, attended the jobs fair with her sister Lindsay, a Thomas Cook employee of 25 years.

"I'm in repatriation, [awaiting redeployment] I'm cabin crew, but I haven't heard anything yet," said Debbie. "The job was a way of life, part of my identification. This will take some adjusting to. It was a successful company, it was an exciting time for us, but it has been snatched away."

Sarah, who worked for Thomas Cook for 23 years, spoke of the implications beyond the immediate job losses at Thomas Cook. "It's soul destroying, what's happened," she said. "It's heart-wrenching when you think so many people are passionate about what they've done. And it's the ripple effect—it's not just us who worked directly for Thomas Cook. It's the hoteliers, the caterers, lots of people, all the people in countries like Cuba that rely on us."

“The unions could have done a lot more, but they’re not interested in the ground staff, in the office, we were always at the bottom of the pecking order.”

“I worked for the freedom travel group, part of Thomas Cook,” said Sue, who was a Thomas Cook employee for 13 years. “I found out about the collapse at half past two in the morning, like everybody else. I kind of expected it but didn’t believe it would ever happen due to the size of the company, the heritage, the impact it would have financially across the world for business and for the people who worked for it. It was very surreal for the first week.

“I think there definitely has to be an accountability into why there wasn’t an investigation a lot sooner into the budget and how the finances were being managed. At our level everything was progressing at rate so there was no cause for concern. There was lots of investment happening across the brand, so it just side-swiped you when it came out—heart-breaking!”

Sarah, mother of two teenage boys, also found the news a terrible blow. “Just a few weeks away from Christmas, too,” she said. “I loved my job and they’ve robbed us.”

Thomas Cook cabin crew employee Sandra told a WSWs reporter, “I was working to help another group airline in Germany [when] I found out that I’d lost my job. They didn’t know how they were going to get us home.

“We’re all heart broken,” she continued. “We were a family basically ... It felt like I was going to see family every day and having that ripped away from you is massive. It’s like a bereavement.

“I’m stressed as a result, because I may also be made homeless. My landlord in Manchester has said that if you are not in full-time employment then I need you out. Instead of being compassionate about it and letting me find another job, he wants me out.”

Sandra explained that the only help she received from the Unite union was to “put me in contact with the council services, who I’ve just talked to and they say that my landlord can’t kick me out with this Section 21 notice that he’s given to me, so they’re looking at that. I’m going to have to find a job and somewhere else to live.

“[Management] told us that everything was still business as normal, the takeover by [Chinese international conglomerate and investment company]

Fusion [Tourism] was going ahead, and then we had the carpet pulled from underneath us. It’s devastating.”

One of the fair’s sponsors, Labour Party mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, played down the devastating economic and social impact of the job losses. He declared, “This Employment Fair shows how quickly Greater Manchester can pull together as a community to support those who need help and support during difficult times.” He failed to mention that the imposition of austerity cuts by Labour councils in the region—on behalf of central government—has devastated jobs and services, while the streets of its towns and cities bear witness to burgeoning homelessness—a real threat now facing the laid-off Thomas Cook staff.

Burnham addressed former Thomas Cook employees who staged a protest outside this week’s Conservative Party conference in Manchester.

On Wednesday, ex-Thomas Cook employees demonstrated in London outside the Houses of Parliament and handed in a petition to Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, demanding answers as to why the company collapsed.



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