

UK warehouse and distribution workers protest exposure to COVID -19

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Major UK retailers have kept their workers on the job in unsafe conditions since Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced special measures to restrict movement and enforce social distancing.

This involves companies that are far from providing essential services, such as IKEA, the self-assembly furniture retailer, and fashion retailers Next, ASOS and Pretty Little Thing.

Following the adage, “Never let a serious crisis go to waste,” they have taken advantage of the suspension of High Street trading to increase their online sales. The burden has fallen on warehouse and distribution workers being made to sort and dispatch goods without any regard for their safety, including the inability to maintain social distancing and inadequate provision of washroom facilities.

Workers have taken to social media and spoken to the press, usually anonymously due to fear of disciplinary measures. South Yorkshire, in the north of England, is the site for many distribution centres, in Sheffield and other former industrial towns such as Doncaster and Barnsley and in surrounding villages on brownfield sites.

Britain’s new “Satanic Mills” are a byword for low pay, casualisation and sweat shop conditions. The threat posed by coronavirus has worsened these conditions in a way that would be instantly recognisable to Charles Dickens, who wrote of the hired “hands” of the nineteenth century mill workers—mere appendages of the machine without any intrinsic value other than to produce profits for their masters.

The *Sheffield Star* reported the anger of warehouse workers in the Doncaster area, citing a Next worker who had taken to Facebook, “accusing bosses of putting wealth before health.” Next operates several

warehouses and distribution centres throughout the former Yorkshire coalfields, including Armthorpe in South Yorkshire and South Elmsall in West Yorkshire.

Daniella Falvey, who works at the South Elmsall distribution centre, posted on social media how workers were forced to take their breaks on the shop floor, or in their cars or the car parks because there is no canteen or rest area. Because of the nature of the work it was impossible to remain two metres away from co-workers. “We’re not key workers, so we can’t get childcare for our children. We’ve offered to take holidays or take unpaid leave. You have no idea what it is doing to us! Its non-essential work. Close down and stop spreading coronavirus for money.”

Photographs have circulated of Next workers having to take their lunch on the pavement outside the warehouse. It was only after these exposures that the company reluctantly took the decision to close its distribution centres from March 26. Workers have now been furloughed on full pay until April 11 and on 80 percent of their wages thereafter through the government subsidy offered to employers.

At the IKEA distribution centre in Armthorpe, a worker told the *Sheffield Star*, “All three shifts... days, afters and nights are depleted with co-workers self-isolating for two weeks. Yet managers are asking workers to all go one shift. It surely can’t be right gathering all workers in one shift.”

Online fashion retailer Pretty Little Thing has refused to furlough its employees. It employs around 1,000 staff at its distribution centre in Tinsley, on the outskirts of Sheffield, described by one worker on the BBC website as “a breeding ground for Covid-19.”

Workers told how there could be up to ten staff in the four-foot aisles they have to pass along in order to pick items for dispatch. The warehouse had just four small

hand sanitisers, which were always empty. One worker said, “Going to work has the chance of killing me and infecting my grandson. To save lives, shut the place.”

At the ASOS distribution centre in Barnsley, operated by XPO Logistics, 500 workers walked out in protest last Saturday. ASOS is one of the largest employers in the former mining town, with a workforce of 4,000. The distribution centre is situated on the site of the former Grimethorpe colliery, a stronghold of the 1984-5 Miners Strike made famous by the 1996 film, “Brassed Off.” It was reported to be the poorest village in Britain by the European Union in 1994.

The GMB union has reported that in a survey of 460 workers at the distribution centre, 98 percent had reported they felt unsafe. The company had supposedly enacted safety measures the week before. Footage emerged of massed workers on a shift change. Workers complained of the lack of social distancing, absence of protective equipment and hand sanitiser as well as a fear that their co-workers might report to work with COVID-19 because otherwise they would only be able to claim the weekly Statutory Sick Pay of £94.25. On Facebook, photographs were posted of workers packed into Stagecoach buses, run by ASOS to take staff to work.

The local Labour council and the union which formally represents 2,000 workers on site have given their stamp of approval to the company. In its statement reported on *BBC Look North*, ASOS denounced workers’ concerns as panic mongering, adding, “As directed by the government and with the support of the Community Union and Barnsley Borough Council we are striking the right balance between keeping our warehouse operational, for the good of our employees and the wider economy, and maintaining the health and safety of staff, which is always our number one priority.”

While the GMB is ostensibly presenting the grievances of ASOS workers, it did so while presenting Next as a model employer. One worker posted on the GMB ASOS Facebook page, “Why doesn’t GMB organize a strike? Community Union on site is absolutely useless—they think about what’s best for the employer first, then employees! If you are so concerned about workers, do something!”

Next, IKEA, ASOS and Pretty Little Thing workers should organise themselves independently of the

unions, in rank-and-file committees, to demand this rampant profiteering end immediately. Every worker not involved in essential services should be furloughed on full pay. Reduced pay is not an acceptable trade-off for protecting life. It is a gift to the employers. Anyone designated as a key worker must be provided with protective equipment, ensuring social distancing is applied and with proper rest room and washing facilities.

The retail giants have forfeited their justification to exist on an economic, social and moral basis and must be expropriated. Complex and extensive supply and distribution networks based upon the co-ordinated labour of millions must be harnessed to provide emergency support for medical supplies and food stuffs as public utilities. It is this socialist perspective and not the false narrative of “responsible capitalism” which should guide the actions of workers.



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