

# Unions collude with companies to keep non-essential UK ASOS warehouse and retail businesses running during pandemic

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Major corporations in the UK's retail and e-tail sector have been given a blank cheque to keep non-essential operations going during the COVID-19 pandemic, placing workers' lives in danger.

In recent weeks, public attention has focussed on the activities of online fashion retail companies such as Next, ASOS and Pretty Little Thing in South Yorkshire, in England's north. This hub of distribution centres—which includes Amazon and Ikea—is located in the former heartlands of the mining and steel mining industry of Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and environs, industry which was shut down by the Thatcher government.

These companies, which employ thousands of workers in the region, have established their reputation as latter day sweatshops based upon low pay, casualisation and high productivity. Most have continued to operate during the lockdown.

On April 1, the WSWs reported a walk-out by 500 ASOS workers in Barnsley. The workers demanded an urgent suspension of operations to safeguard lives during the pandemic. But this essential demand has brought them into conflict not only with ASOS, but with the Tory government, the local Labour Party-run authority and the Community Union which have all closed ranks with ASOS.

ASOS workers have been faced with the dilemma of continuing to work in unsafe conditions or if they go into self-isolation or fall ill with the virus, of trying to survive on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) of just £94.25 per week.

An ASOS worker in Barnsley told the WSWs, "It is really bad because ASOS refuses to shut down the warehouse during these rainy days and is thinking about profit only. It's going to be hard to survive with £95 per week but our lives are more important than money.

"If the government supports companies like ASOS, then there is no incentive for them to take care of their workers and they're going to keep the business open.

"They are going to leave people to die because they refuse to lock down all non-essential work. Warehouses like ASOS will never shut down, unfortunately."

Another ASOS worker explained, "Many workers initially chose to stay at home and survive on this sick pay, but must now return to work due to financial pressures. Would I prefer to stay home and get 80 percent of my wage? Of course, but this is not an option and I simply can't afford to be paid £94 per week."

The same ASOS worker explained how the company is trying to lure employees to work by offering extra cash benefits, "They said we will get £20 extra a day for 'travel expenses' and free food in the canteen."

## Political struggle

The workers drew attention to an official letter sent by Business Secretary Alok Sharma, "To everyone in the UK retail sector."

This letter makes clear that the government green-lighted companies such as ASOS, allowing them to maintain operations from day one, despite claiming publicly that this was meant to apply only to essential services.

Sharma's letter obliterates any distinction between essential and non-essential work, claiming that if retail is kept operational then this will allow social distancing to be effective. With utmost cynicism, Sharma states, "The retail sector is a vital lifeline for those self-isolating, and for all of us in adhering to the Government's social distancing guidelines.

"...So whether you're working in a shop, large or small, or in a distribution centre or supply chain supporting retailers operating online, I would like to convey my heartfelt and personal thanks for everything that you're doing to support our joint national effort."

What the Business Secretary describes as a "lifeline" has been a breeding ground for the pandemic. One Twitter user, commenting on the sickening fact that ASOS was offering a 20 percent retail discount to National Health Service (NHS) staff, wrote, "The NHS need a break, NOT a discount code when they're dealing with the aftermath of cases of Corona from your sweatbox of a warehouse."

The response of the local Labour authority and Community has been to align themselves fully with the company. ASOS has even cited their approval, using it to keep workers on the job.

The walk-out by 500 ASOS workers on March 28 came a day after Barnsley Metropolitan Council (BMC) conducted an environmental inspection of the site and gave it a clean bill of health. Video footage taken over that weekend showed ASOS workers on packed shuttle buses and forming long security queues where no social distancing was being enforced.

A letter from BMC's PLACE directorate to ASOS makes a mockery of any claim it represents an independent enforcement agency. It is written from the standpoint of a humble servant.

"We've all worked hard to drive our local economy forward, and we welcome thriving enterprises and businesses such as yours. You are vital in providing jobs for our residents and supporting the communities around surrounding your business."

The letter added, "We're offering you continued support as you follow the Government's statement made on 23 March 2020 that 'online remains open', and their follow on statement made on 24 March 2020 'that if you are unable to work from home you should go to work to keep the economy going.'"

The Community Union which has around 2,000 members in the warehouse has signed off on the company's token "social distancing" undertakings, allowing its operations to continue. This includes promised extra buses to avoid overcrowding to and from work; a stipend of £100 a week to cover other forms of travel; and an offer of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) "to staff who request it!"

All of this is premised on the recognition that ASOS business needs must take priority despite the continued risk posed to workers.

The caveats from Community that if the company does not comply with the agreed measures the warehouse should be closed are hot air.

The Labour authority and Community have put the fox in charge of the hen house. ASOS is a company with an abysmal record on safety. In 2019, it was reported the warehouse had 148 ambulance visits over the course of three years.

The actions of Community have underscored the fact that it is essentially a company union. In 2017, it was awarded recognition rights at ASOS ahead of the GMB union, based on a sweetheart deal.

The Labour and trade union bureaucracy has attempted to dress up their slavish support for ASOS by claiming they are protecting jobs and workers livelihoods. This is a sick joke. In January, ASOS announced it was ending its delivery contract with Menzies Distribution, which employs full-time drivers, in favour of couriers like DPD and Hermes that use self-employed drivers. The decision means the loss of 50 drivers' jobs and 20 administration posts by the end of April. The company also informed nearly all of its employees on fixed-term contract that it would be bringing forward their end dates. The affected staff, including at head office and other business functions, have been put on notice.

In the face of rank-and-file opposition to both ASOS and the Community Union, the GMB has stepped in, presenting itself as an alternative and highlighting the company's continued catalogue of abuses against the workforce.

But the GMB has isolated the struggle of ASOS workers and told them to put their faith in the company "to do the right thing." The union has opposed any fight to unite ASOS workers in a common fight with retail and distribution workers throughout the UK and across Europe. Instead, it organised an online petition addressed to ASOS CEO, Nick Beighton, to shut up shop.

The GMB has hailed Next as the model employer which ASOS should follow. This was all to appease the company on the basis

that it would not entail any redistribution of the profits it has amassed. Next suspended operations at its warehouses and entered the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in which businesses are subsidised by the government to pay 80 percent of the wages of workers who are furloughed. Next has only had to pay the 20 percent shortfall to its workforce and the GMB claimed ASOS could do likewise.

In order to present a left face, the GMB wheeled out former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. However, his comments only served to demonstrate his own duplicity. Corbyn gave ASOS maximum wriggle room to claim its facility could be kept open without endangering workers' lives, tweeting on March 28:

"Concerning to hear reports from workers that the @ASOS warehouse in Barnsley was visited by three ambulances yesterday. @GMB\_Union are right to say: this can't go on.

"ASOS bosses must make their workplace safe—or shut up shop."

The net result was to demobilise opposition among ASOS workers and allow the company to ride roughshod over their interests.

At a national level, the GMB has joined efforts by all the trade unions to keep business open. The most recent posting on the "GMB at ASOS" Facebook page is the joint statement between the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) which includes praise from the CBI that "Businesses are stepping up to the mark in these incredibly challenging times."

The allies of ASOS workers are not the trade unions and the Labour Party who have acted to obstruct their fight. They should form rank-and-file committees and turn out to other retail and e-commerce warehouses and distribution centres. The demand must be raised for the closure of all non-essential work on full pay.

The guiding principle of this fight must be what the working class needs not what corporations like ASOS claim they can afford. This will only be decided in struggle based on the fight for the reorganisation of economic and social life and the redistribution of the vast wealth amassed in the hands of the super-rich.



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