

ASOS warehouse workers: Lives versus corporate profit in the UK

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ASOS, the UK's largest online fashion retailer, has devoted all its efforts to suppressing calls during the coronavirus pandemic for the closure of its nonessential warehouse operations in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. The firm employs around 4,000 workers at the site.

The Labour Party-run local authority and Community trade union have closed ranks behind the company, agreeing to keep the site open provided ASOS follows basic safety protocols including social distancing.

Workers protested that their lives should not be placed at risk through these token arrangements, which many suspected would not be adhered to. This came to a head when 500 walked out on a shift on March 28.

The local environmental agency provided a rubber stamp for the company, with the proviso that it abide by guidelines on social distancing, including staggering its shifts and providing extra buses to and from work to avoid overcrowding.

This has already been revealed as window dressing. Video footage and photos posted on social media show ASOS workers on crammed buses, at overcrowded bus stops and long queues forming to clock on for work.

On April 2, the BBC interviewed an ASOS worker who gave examples of how social distancing was not being complied with, including queues to collect scanner guns: "The choice is go to work and potentially die or struggle with your finances."

This opening chapter of the struggle by ASOS workers has been a bitter one, demonstrating that they cannot rely on the local authority, state bodies or the unions for protection. This experience is repeated throughout the sector.

Clothing and homeware company Next bowed to pressure to close its warehouses on March 26. The FTSE 100 company, the largest clothing retailer by sales in the UK, agreed to furlough its staff through the

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme in which the government pays 80 percent of workers' wages. It agreed to meet the cost of the 20 percent shortfall.

Within three weeks, it reopened its warehouse operations and online business and recalled 3,000 workers based on a scaled-down operation. The minimum safety procedures it introduced were centred on getting workers back on the job as the death toll from the pandemic grew. This operation was worked out in collaboration with Usdaw (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers).

The GMB union had hailed Next as a model ASOS should follow. Its call to close the warehouse were based on appeals to ASOS "to do the right thing" and assurances that the burden of paying the wages of furloughed workers would be met by the government.

The GMB and Usdaw are the fourth and fifth largest unions in the UK, with a membership of 600,000 and 400,000 respectively. They have sabotaged the fight to assert the rights of workers against the profit hungry retail companies.

The lockdown measures announced by the Boris Johnson government on March 23 were supposed to mean only essential services remaining open and running. However, the guidelines were worded to allow for nonessential workers to remain on the job if they could not work from home.

Companies such as ASOS were given the green light from government to remain open, amid claims this was to encourage social distancing by preventing shopping on the high street. This was a lie. The goods being sold online by clothing and sportswear companies were not essential and could not therefore be purchased on the high street. Importantly, moreover, it forced workers to labour in overcrowded warehouses without protection.

The real motivation behind the vagueness of the

policy was to make sure that economic interests outweighed any concerns over the risk to safety. As for the claim that the economic consequences of workers not remaining on the job are worse than the threat posed by the virus, the message is “Risk your life or lose your livelihood.” This is now the rationale for the demand for the return to work without the virus having been contained, confirming that the Johnson government has never backed away essentially from its “herd immunity” policy.

This is the reason why 21,000 warehouse workers across South Yorkshire at ASOS, Pretty Little Thing (owned by the Boohoo Group), Next, IKEA and Amazon have been kept on the job in an environment which is a breeding ground for the virus.

At its warehouse in Rochdale, Greater Manchester, JD Sports is keeping workers on the job to boost online sales of tracksuits and trainers. It also claims to be following government guidelines regarding safety and that its operations are essential to the economic wellbeing of society.

The local environment agency again gave a clean bill of health after four site inspections. But workers at the site have provided photographs of overcrowded locker rooms and 10 came forward to speak to ITV News to explain that it was impossible to maintain the 2 metres social distancing in the warehouse, locker room and canteens. Shared equipment such as keypads, laptops and radios were not cleaned regularly and the provision of protective gloves and sanitiser was inadequate. A fingerprint sensor is used for staff to clock in, with 400 to 500 workers on each of the 12-hour shifts.

USDAW was inundated with over 200 complaints from workers about conditions in the JD workplace but has organised no action to close the facility. There is, moreover, a clear contradiction between its call to close JD Sports and its role in supporting Next reopening its warehouses to sell nonessential online items. Rochdale Labour council has refused to take any action against the company even though its cabinet minister for business, John Blundell, questioned claims that JD Sports is safety compliant.

From the standpoint of defending workers’ basic interests, the unions have proven utterly worthless, even when the lives of their members are placed in immediate danger. They function to police opposition and ensure that the dictates of the corporations are

upheld. The pandemic has served to underscore this truth.

Workers in the warehouse and logistics sector number well over 2 million—around 8 percent of the UK workforce. The average wage of a warehouse workers is £8.95, only a fraction above the national minimum wage of £8.72. A quarter of the workforce is made up of migrants from the European Union.

The pandemic has demonstrated that the real “wealth creators” in society include the millions of workers who operate a vast and complex supply and distribution network which encompasses the globe and is integrated across national boundaries. ASOS has 482 supply factories for its clothing in China and India compared to 32 in the UK and distribution hubs in Germany and the US—with 60 percent of sales generated globally.

This huge infrastructure and the labour of millions are subordinated to one end—the accumulation of wealth by the ruling elite. The net worth of ASOS owner Anders Holch Polsen is over £6 billion. He is the richest man in Denmark and owns 13 estates in Scotland. A study conducted in 2017 showed it would take an ASOS worker 214 years to earn the equivalent of CEO Nick Beighton’s total pay award for that year, £3.1 million.

The purpose of ASOS remaining open is not to protect the jobs of workers or the well-being of “the economy,” but to amass more profit while the lives of workers are treated as a disposable commodity. The company is rich enough to furlough its workforce on full pay many times over without a government handout. However, its response has been to exploit the disruption caused by the pandemic to increase its market share against its rivals.

In the fight against the pandemic the working class must challenge the premise that capitalism is the only viable basis for the organisation of economic and social life. It is only on this basis that ASOS workers can assert their rights and join the growing resistance of workers globally, whose universal demand is that workers’ lives must not be sacrificed for corporate profit.



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