

UK Labour council, Community union reject appeal to close ASOS warehouse after confirmed COVID-19 cases

Tony Robson
22 May 2020

ASOS and Labour controlled Barnsley Council have flatly rejected appeals made by the GMB union for the closure and deep-cleaning of the company's warehouse following confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The GMB has hundreds of members in the warehouse but is not the officially recognised union due to a sweetheart deal signed by the company with the Community union in 2017.

Acting on information from its members of two confirmed cases of COVID-19, on May 12 the GMB issued an open letter to ASOS and the leader of Barnsley council, Sir Steve Houghton, over safety in the workplace.

The GMB went no further than to remind both parties of their statutory safety duties and called for a temporary closure of the warehouse to organise a deep clean. But Community joined ASOS and the Labour authority in rejecting this elementary measure. ASOS has confirmed a total number of nine cases of COVID-19 in its workforce.

There was no offer of a review of existing safety protocols, only a disclaimer of any responsibility. ASOS stated that "close to half of those affected had not been on site for more than two weeks prior to testing positive."

This line was echoed by the Labour leader of Barnsley's council, Sir Steve Houghton, who said, "It is important to remember that ASOS has a large workforce and this is a global pandemic. When employees test positive for a disease, it does not necessarily mean they contracted it at work."

The response reveals that government guidance commits employers to nothing. ASOS stated that that it has fulfilled its responsibilities by informing Public

Health England of the cases and was abiding by contact tracing while affected workers had self-isolated.

This is presented purely as a data collection exercise, divorced from any proactive measures. Rather than closing the premises for a deep clean, ASOS had arranged "enhanced" cleaning of immediate areas of the factory where the infected workers were based and instructed those who had been in contact with these workers to self-monitor their situation. The GMB reports that workers on site have still not been notified of the infections by ASOS.

From the start of the pandemic ASOS, along with other online fashion and clothing retailers, were given the green light to remain open even though they are nonessential businesses. Economic interests dictated by a multi-billion-pound industry were given unconditional precedence over the risks posed to workers in precarious employment, on low pay in overcrowded workplaces. They were given Hobson's choice—either risk your life and the health of your family or lose your livelihood.

This economic blackmail has not silenced ASOS workers. Instead the company has relied on the Labour authority and Community to downplay or dismiss the legitimate grievances of workers over safety as panic mongering. This official whitewash has been opposed by ASOS workers, including by those who have been taken ill with the virus.

A young mother who works on inbound at the warehouse took to Facebook and explained how she had contracted COVID-19 after returning from maternity leave and spending two-and-a-half weeks on the shop floor. Despite her best efforts it had proved impossible to maintain social distancing with workers

sharing adjacent benches. Her main fear was of passing the disease on to her family as she self-isolated at home with her 10-month-old son.

In late March, she had posted on her Facebook page that the headquarters of ASOS in London was closed and staff were working from home, but the company saw fit to keep its workforce on the job at the warehouse in Barnsley, which employs around 4,000. She urged, “Coronavirus exploits ambivalence and inequality. Time for all of us to step up and show basic decency.”

ASOS has been able to force workers back on the job because the most they are entitled to claim while off sick or suspected of being ill with the virus is Statutory Sick Pay of £95 per week.

As staffing levels begin to resume normal levels, the token measures drawn up for social distancing based on a maximum of 500 per shift become even more unworkable. Thanks to Barnsley’s Labour authority and Community, the conditions have been created whereby ASOS can now scapegoat workers for any failures relating to social distancing. The company has made ASOS workers sign a declaration defining failure to comply with social distancing as gross misconduct—a sackable offence. In an Orwellian twist, failure to sign the document is also deemed gross misconduct. As has been demonstrated at Amazon in the US, this will also be used as a pretext to victimise workers who protest and organise against unsafe working conditions.

The role of Community shows how the unions function as an extended arm of management. But for its part the GMB is carefully framing its actions to avoid any mobilisation of the workforce against ASOS. The GMB disassociated itself from the wildcat action on March 28, when 500 workers walked off the day shift.

The defence of ASOS workers’ right to safe working conditions will not come about through public relations exercises conducted by the GMB. The GMB’s open letter was supposed to shame ASOS into action and win the backing of Barnsley Council. It did neither.

Industry analysts such as *Retail Week* have shown how the companies which dominate online retail globally are utilising the COVID-19 crisis to aggressively pursue restructuring at the expense of their workforce to drive their competitors to the wall. An article headlined “Retail Darwinism—who will emerge from COVID-19 as retail’s fittest?” states that this

process could result in just “10 brands” controlling the entire market. In relation to ASOS and Boohoo—the two leading UK online fashion retailers—it refers to their ability to mount takeovers and pursue price wars, a process described as “starving the weak of oxygen.”

The defence of ASOS workers’ lives means a fight against the veto these corporations enjoy over workplace safety. A rank-and-file safety committee, independent of the trade unions and made up of trusted workers, must take decision-making over workplace organisation and productivity out of the hands of ASOS and its faithful retainers. Safety must be organised in accordance with minimising the spread of the pandemic—starting with the immediate closure of the premises for the organisation of a deep clean.

An appeal should be made to health professionals who are not beholden to corporate profit to assist with the mandatory testing, contact tracing and quarantining measures necessary to safeguard workers and the wider community. Links must be established with logistic and warehouse workers in the UK and internationally, confronted with the same unsafe conditions. We encourage all workers who want to wage such a struggle to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact