

Outbreak of COVID-19 at Pretty Little Thing distribution centre in Sheffield, UK

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“Behind every great fortune there is a crime.” — Honore de Balzac

A total of 28 workers have tested positive with COVID-19 so far at the Sheffield distribution centre in South Yorkshire of Pretty Little Thing (PLT).

PLT is a subsidiary of the Boohoo Group, the fast fashion online retailer heavily implicated in the sweat shop conditions prevalent in the Leicester textile industry, which has served as a vector for spreading the virus and a contributory factor in the local lockdown of the city.

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the Sheffield distribution depot, which employs more than 1,000 workers and is operated by Clipper logistics, demonstrates that the highly exploitative and unsafe practices of the Boohoo Group extend across the supply and distribution network.

While textile workers in Leicester work in ramshackle workshops and are paid around £4 an hour, less than half the national minimum wage of £8.72, the distribution of the goods they manufacture takes place in state-of-the art warehouses like PLT’s Sheffield depot. Here, workers are paid barely above the national minimum wage and work 12-hour shifts, while having to meet draconian productivity targets. The billionaire owner of Boohoo, Mahmud Kamani, is ranked among the richest 1,000 people in the UK. Pretty Little Thing was founded in 2012 by his sons, Umar and Adam Kamani, and 66 percent of the company was acquired by Boohoo for £3.3 million in 2016.

The sweat shop conditions in the Leicester garment industry have been described as an open secret. The same is true of the warehouse and distribution centres of PLT and other major companies, such as JD Sports, Sports Direct, ASOS and Amazon. Long before the pandemic, the sector had achieved notoriety status for unsafe and unhygienic working conditions, low pay and casual employment.

PLT workers had warned as far back as March that the

distribution centre was “a breeding ground for the virus”. Anonymously, they spoke to major media outlets and referred to the lack of social distancing and facilities to wash their hands. They complained of having just four soap dispensers in a 650,000 square foot warehouse, the size of 15 football pitches, and having to conduct their work in 4-foot-wide aisles, while trying to socially distance.

All the clothing and fast fashion online retailers were authorised by the government to continue operations during the lockdown, refuting the claim that only essential services would function. For some of the most exploited sections of workers the Johnson government’s herd immunity policy was never suspended. Their safety was of no concern compared to the online retailers’ ability to exploit the closure of high street retail to make a killing.

Even with 28 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among employees at PLT, workers’ concerns were dismissed. Public Health England (PHE) and the Labour Party-run local authority inspections team have borrowed from the playbook of the meat processing and food industry, where other outbreaks have occurred. This means whitewashing the companies of any responsibility for spreading the virus and failure to take the most elementary containment measures.

A Yorkshire pub acted with more due diligence, closing after one customer tested positive for the virus, than corporations employing hundreds and thousands reporting bigger outbreaks. It closed for a deep clean and tested all the staff.

A closure and deep clean was not carried out at PLT or its competitor, ASOS in nearby Barnsley. ASOS reported nine confirmed cases of the virus in mid-May among its 2,000 workforce, but along with the local Labour authority refused follow up action. This was also the case at the Cranswick Convenience Foods meat processing plant, where three workers died from COVID-19. Even in

the event of workplace fatalities, the Health and Safety Executive has not conducted a site visit and instead carried out its enquiries via email with the company.

The enfeebled nature of the enforcement agencies places a question mark over whether these companies are legally compliant. However, it is clear that workers cannot expect the law to protect them. The essential message is business as usual. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with the profit-making operations of these corporations.

The attempts by the competitors of PLT and Boohoo, such as ASOS, Next and Zoolanda, to distance themselves from the most exploitative practices exposed should be treated with contempt.

The most naked defence of these practices was made by an owner of a garment factory in Leicester, which supplies Boohoo and has been shown to be paying workers below the minimum wage. He told the *Daily Mail*, “Anyone saying they are paying all their employees the minimum wage in the garment industry is a fraud... It’s a lie because it’s not possible.

“People who come from India or Bulgaria don’t have money, they don’t speak English, but they need money to put food in their bellies. Boohoo is the company that gives us our bread and butter. They are a blessing because without them everyone would go to China and get them made cheaper.”

Corporate fortunes are squeezed from workers at every stage of the sourcing, production, and distribution process, resulting in a never end race to the bottom. The handful of corporations dominating global ecommerce will benefit from a further concentration of wealth because of the pandemic, as they cull their rivals more dependent on high street retail. This cut-throat process is referred to in the industry as “retail Darwinism.”

In the garment industry and warehouse and distribution network, the super exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers from eastern Europe, Asia and Africa is a key component of this strategy. It goes hand in hand with a broader assault on the working class. The deindustrialisation of the UK represented in areas such as Sheffield and Barnsley through the closure of the steel mills and coal mining has been used to develop a pool of casualised cheap labour.

An article published in the *Financial Times* in 2019 on the PLT warehouse run by Clipper stated, “Sheffield in South Yorkshire is an ideal location. It has a young population, with unemployment above the national average at more than 4 per cent, and about 60,000

students.”

PLT has marketed itself as a “student friendly” employer, exploiting the need for students to find work and pay their way through university, while accumulating a debt from tuition fees well over £30,000 and living and housing costs.

PLT, Boohoo and ASOS are latter-day robber barons and Labour run councils in Sheffield, Barnsley and Leicester will not intervene against their criminality. Before the pandemic they were hailed as the entrepreneurs responsible for the regeneration of run-down local economies. Now the levels of exploitation on which their wealth depends has proven to be a driver of the pandemic.

The battalions of workers in the garment industry and warehouse and distribution sector remain largely outside of the trade unions. To the extent that the unions exert any influence, it is to demobilise emerging opposition behind calls for the multi-billionaire companies to be “socially responsible”.

During the official lockdown, calls by USDAW and Unite the union for Boohoo, ASOS and JD Sports to furlough their warehouse and distribution staff and pick up the government subsidy were ignored as they exploited the suspension of high street trading to boost their online sales and reap greater profits.

What happens next depends upon the working class. Containment of the virus means ending the single-minded pursuit of profit. How the workplaces are run and organised must not be the prerogative of the corporations.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the establishment of independent workplace safety committees. PLT workers should demand the closure of the Sheffield depot for the purpose of arranging a deep clean. Universal testing of all workers and their families must be organised. All PLT workers and their families should be able to self-isolate with no loss of wages. PLT must pick up the bill for these basic measures, which it can easily afford from the profits it has amassed.



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