

“We have a right to withdraw our labour, especially when being exposed to disease and death”

UK Morrisons distribution worker speaks on Bridgwater COVID-19 outbreak

Our correspondent
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The World Socialist Web Site spoke with a worker who wished to remain anonymous about the situation at the distribution centre of major supermarket chain Morrisons in Bridgwater, Somerset, which had an outbreak of COVID-19 in March.

The distribution centre is operated by DHL Supply and employs around 3,000 workers. It spans approximately three-quarters of a mile and is located near the M5 motorway, supplying around 100 Morrisons supermarkets in the southwest of England and large parts of Wales.

“The outbreak of COVID-19 among the workforce occurred back in March. It has been hard to establish the exact numbers affected because of the ongoing secrecy by management. As far as I am aware there was a total of 64 workers who were taken ill with the virus, and two deaths. There were still 39 active infections up to the middle of August.

“Workers were first informed of the cases in March at briefings by managers. They did not appear to be concentrated in any one part of the warehouse. We were expected to keep working. There was never any suggestion of mandatory testing of workers on site. It was left to workers to organise their own testing. But that was only if they were symptomatic and it is well known that you can be carrying the virus even if you are asymptomatic. There was not even a temporary closure of the warehouse to organise a deep clean. The only areas deep cleaned were the canteen and amenities.

“The distribution centre has remained operational throughout the pandemic, as it is classified as a key

industry, but no measures were taken at all to protect workers from exposure or spreading the virus such as social distancing or face coverings prior to the outbreak.

“When news came through of the fact that two of our work colleagues had died from the virus around 35 workers walked out and went into self-isolation. That was on or around May 9.

“It was only after the outbreak and the deaths of two workers that any safety measures were introduced, but these are largely of a token nature. Floor markings and notices were introduced over social distancing around the warehouse and in the canteen and posters put up telling people to wash their hands. Face masks have never been mandatory and were only recently supplied by the company.

“Enforcement of the social distancing is carried out by the Willow Green Team employees who have not been able to keep up with the productivity targets on the shop floor. They are particularly aggressive in the canteen about social distancing, but do not wear any face masks and they are speaking to workers directly. They have told workers that face masks do not provide any protection to justify their own disregard for safety. If workers are seen speaking to one another managers will intervene to tell them to separate but they can often be seen in groups of three or four, talking in a huddle.

“Because of the nature of the work it is virtually impossible to maintain a 2-metre distance from other workers all the time. The work is extremely repetitive, and workers are set punishing targets. The pickers wear a device on their wrist which communicates with a

computer system ordering them to collect items from around the warehouse and take them to different drop-off points.

“The managers will come down on the shop floor and bark orders if they feel they are not working fast enough—‘Faster, faster!’ It reminds me of the opening scene of the film version of *Les Miserables* where the prisoners are having to haul the ship behind them on ropes. You are expected to stay back and work an extra hour if the productivity targets have not been met and you are informed on the day. It can be announced over the PA system or posted on a notice board, which can be on the other side of the warehouse.

“The profits that DHL and Morrisons have been making will not have been seen by the workers. Agency workers receive an hourly rate of £8.73 and those directly employed by DHL Supply get £8.80 for doing the same work. It only rises to £9.20 if you have worked more than 45 hours per week. Those employed directly by DHL Supply received a one-off £300 bonus for working during the pandemic, but agency staff did not even get this paltry amount.

“Agency staff who have self-isolated only received the Statutory Sickness Payment of £94.25 per week. This applies more pressure on workers to continue working even if they suspect they may have the virus.

“We are described as ‘key workers’ but it feels more like indentured labour to me, and our importance is certainly not reflected in our pay, safety and general treatment.

“I watched a video on YouTube about the Plague in 1655. The way they dealt with that was to lock up entire families for 40 days and only let them out after that if they survived. It was the poor which suffered. The rich were protected, they fled to isolation. I don’t see any difference with the approach today. It is the working class which suffers. It is the same age-old problem. I do not accept this as the natural order of things: ‘Know your place.’ We all should be equal.

“The union at Morrisons is USDAW. They have not challenged the company over the lack of safety. They have a no-strike agreement in place, which is advertised on the noticeboards around the warehouse.

“We have a right to withdraw our labour, especially when being exposed to disease and death. This needs to be done together. You cannot make a difference as individuals. We need something that is the opposite of

the bosses. My labour is their profit. There really is no basis for a compromise over safety. We are the ones making the profits and have a right to leave work in one piece.

“I agree with the call [by the Socialist Equality Party] for setting up independent workplace safety committees. Workers need to begin to take matters into their own hands. We are being kept in the dark about matters that concern our lives and welfare. I intend to look into this more and study what you are putting forward.”



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