

Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic: How a young Tesco worker was victimised for whistleblowing

Jordan Harrison
5 August 2022

Jordan was victimised by British supermarket giant Tesco in Inverness, Scotland during the first year of the pandemic for speaking out against management's cover-up of a COVID-19 infection. This is an edited version of his written statement to the Global Workers' Inquest.

When the COVID-19 mitigation regulations initially came into place, most staff in the store where I worked wore personal protective equipment (PPE), and in some departments, screens were fitted at checkouts to keep staff safe. Although staff were equipped with face masks if they didn't have their own, they weren't properly trained in usage or disposal.

Social distancing was enforced amongst staff for the first couple of months after the pandemic began. However, it seemed as if the concept of social distancing was used more as an excuse for management to stop workers from chatting when they could have been working instead.

My role at Tesco was a Personal Shopper, which meant I was responsible for picking customers' home shopping (when they ordered online) and taking their items to the loading vans. I was always under a strict time limit to get my job done. I made as much effort as I could to keep my distance from colleagues and customers, which meant that sometimes I was behind schedule, but I preferred to keep myself and others safe.

Management decided that overtime would only be given to those who exceeded time limits [for fulfilling online orders]. Tesco had eradicated most full-time contracts a couple of years back. I was on an eight-hour contract (many colleagues were the same), so those of us with bills to pay relied on overtime to survive. Effectively, with the level of online orders coming in, social distancing was abandoned.

I tried to speak to colleagues about their thoughts on how Tesco was dealing with the pandemic. Many were unhappy with several issues (e.g., lack of social distancing, prioritisation of overtime for Personal Shoppers who work fastest, the numbers of people allowed in the store at any one time, etc.) but they were reluctant to say or do too much. This is understandable because most people cannot afford to lose their job if they speak out.

Matters escalated when a colleague in my department

contracted COVID-19 in September 2020. The way Tesco dealt with this was shocking. The store manager sent out a private video to all staff explaining the situation (not naming the person or department), and then demanded we not tell anyone lest we scare the customers. The store was not closed for a deep-clean, and everyone was sent to work the very next day as if nothing had happened.

This was before the vaccines had been developed, and tens of thousands of people had already died a horrible death.

Within a few hours, my Snapchat story had been screenshotted and shared over 100 times on Facebook. Most shares were by people in the Inverness community. Many of the comments approved of my whistleblowing.

Whoever originally screenshotted my Snapchat story had forgotten to conceal my identity. It wasn't long before I had a couple of people searching up my name and privately messaging me to thank me, or to ask for more details about where and when the infection took place. Some colleagues and managers began to message me asking me to take the post down. So, I did.

As it turned out, my Snapchat story made its way to local radio station MFR. From what I heard, they showed up at my Tesco store to investigate. Tesco was in no position to lie, so they admitted there was a case of COVID-19 within the store. This was then reported by MFR. But their report didn't mention how Tesco was originally planning to keep it a secret. MFR had not seen the video message the store manager had sent to us staff.

I thought this was rather an important detail for the public to know, so I wrote to every newspaper I could think of and supplied them with the aforementioned evidence.

The *Scottish Sun* published the entire video on their website. Not too much of an analysis was given, but a brief transcript was published, and some comparisons were made to outbreaks of coronavirus at a huge Tesco warehouse in Livingston, West Lothian (less than an hour's drive from Edinburgh). The article was titled, "Covid Cover-Up – Coronavirus Scotland: Inverness Tesco manager videoed urging staff to keep positive case secret from public."

The *Inverness Courier* and the *Aberdeen Press & Journal* also published articles on the case, but they did not mention that Tesco had planned to cover it up.

Management was rather livid. My own manager tried to call me several times, but my mind was not ready to answer immediately, so I left it a couple of days before calling her back. When I did, she asked if I thought that what I had done was appropriate. I told her I most certainly did think it was appropriate, and that it was Tesco's actions that were not appropriate because they had not informed people about a public health issue in their own community.

My manager attempted to intimidate me further, telling me there was an official procedure to these situations. My response was that coronavirus does not wait for the procedure. These comments were later held against me in a letter they sent threatening an investigation. I took no notice of the letter and posted my resignation shortly after receiving it.

There was a lot of dissent in that store (particularly surrounding this situation), but I don't think anyone expected anyone to do anything. Most people were shocked at what I had done, and more importantly, at what Tesco had done. I had a lot of support from friends within the store.

I also got a lot of feedback from friends and family, most of whom approved of my actions and affirmed that I had done the right thing. Where the article had been shared on Facebook, there were fairly mixed reactions, some condemning what I did, others condoning.

Thankfully, I was studying at college at the time, so I survived off my bursary until the end of the academic year, and then found another job as a delivery driver. For the rest of the academic year, I certainly received less money than what I was used to.

Unsurprisingly, USDAW (the official trade union at Tesco) was nowhere to be seen, and I had no intentions of going to them myself. They are notorious for betraying workers. Most recently, they agreed to a de facto wage cut with ASDA for their 123,000 retail staff without consulting their workers.

In 2021, USDAW also engineered a pay sell-out against Tesco workers who threatened strike action over low wages. USDAW did the same with Morrison's distribution workers in November 2021, calling off a planned strike of 1,100 staff for a 5 percent deal. USDAW are nothing but partners of management and cannot be trusted.

Tesco stores suffered repeated COVID-19 outbreaks throughout the pandemic. In January 2021, a Tesco store in Bridgend in Wales claimed 40 confirmed cases over the course of a month, with 140 workers self-isolating at one time. A Bridgend worker told *Wales Online*, "The staff are scared, absolutely scared. Because of the levels of people in the store, Tesco has now reduced the amount of people who can come in but leading up to Christmas there was no authority."

When it came to the Christmas period, the most profitable time of year for retail, all limits over customer capacity were

dropped. During the Christmas trading period of 2020, Tesco registered a sales growth of 12.4 percent in its UK and Ireland stores.

On 9 January 2021, at one Tesco store in Inverclyde, two workers died after contracting COVID-19. On 16 January 2021, a Tesco store in Old Trafford, Manchester was forced to close following the infection of 50 staff members and the death of one employee. Tesco chose not to confirm the cause of death themselves "out of respect for the employee's family".

All in all, it is vital that these experiences are shared and discussed as widely as possible. This is not an isolated incident. This is happening all over the world, across all types of workplaces. It has been proven time and time again that businesses will prioritise profit over health and safety, and even over our lives. The more we share our individual experiences, and the more awareness that is raised, the more we workers can get on the same page and work together to fight against this pandemic. Because neither the unions nor big business are going to do it for us.

Many claim we are now at the end of the pandemic, justifying this with assertions that the newest strains of virus are "flu-like", and that the virus will kill itself off. This is a lie. Since the latest wave of infections on June 12, more than 4,700 people in the UK have been killed according to Our World in Data, which equals more than 100 deaths a day. Such findings are not mild in the slightest.

No matter what the media says, we are not at the end of the pandemic at all. With the decision to drop all public health measures and surrender to the spread of COVID-19 by governments worldwide, it is dreadful to think what the next stage brings.

Global elimination is still possible but not under the framework of capitalism. The current social system has proven its own inadequacies at dealing with the pandemic by continuously prioritising profits over the lives of workers all around the world. Only by restructuring the economic system to suit everyone's needs, rather than the greedy desires of a few, can we truly collaborate and take up the struggle against this pandemic.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact