

# KEY WORKERS UNITED

Norwich, No 1, June 2020

Welcome to the first issue of **KEY WORKERS UNITED (Norwich)**. We aim to report on the present situation with eye-witness accounts of what it's like to work during lockdown. They point to the need for a reconstruction of Britain based on community control and participation at all levels of society. There is a lot of support for real change after Covid but this will not happen unless there is a peoples' movement to push for it and a government that is prepared to encourage and support it. The present Tory government will not do that, and will, in fact, seek to reverse all the gains made and say that public spending must be drastically cut and the unions will need to be curbed. They will also seek to blame minorities using conspiracy theories that claim covid is a plot or a hoax. There will be a massive recession that will put millions on the dole.

***So over the next 3-5 years we will need to build an alternative starting with a huge march for key workers in Norwich and then setting up a democratic commission to start organising a public sector alliance, an unemployed workers movement, and discuss how we can create emergency planning institutions that can help us deal with future pandemics and climate change.***



By a Norwich retail worker

I work part time in food retail, and if I were to summarise my experience in two words, they would be 'what lockdown!'

Footfall has increased hugely. It would seem that because of government guidelines it's easy for customers to view going shopping as something you're 'allowed' to do, and often visit two or three times a day, maybe accompanied by their extended families.

The company has done a good job of providing us with the necessary PPE, albeit a little late in the day. Initially we were given one pot of 'alcohol free hand wash' for all staff! Now though, we do have screens up, gloves, masks, and proper hand gel. I believe a deadline date was set by USDAW, which may have done the trick.

Effective social distancing measures have been put in to place for customers, the queuing system appears to work well. Less so for the staff however. There is one area of the shop where it's almost impossible, which can cause tension. Most of us try hard to give each other space - however social distancing doesn't appear to apply to one or two, further up the chain of command.

The company has shown its appreciation of our hard work by giving us a bonus - which certainly is a bonus. Just as importantly, those customers who have always been warm and friendly have been even more so, which helps very much. On the whole, the job is more tiring than usual, as there's tension in the air, I feel I can't drop my guard.

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The shop worker and COVID 19 by Attila the shelf-stacker

Toilet rolls! As most people prepared for lockdown, supermarket staff were working extra hard coping with panic buying of foodstuffs and bizarrely, toilet rolls. Certainly at the hardware store I work for there was a huge demand for sanding dust masks, strange really because they wouldn't protect you, but more understandably, latex gloves, hand gel and cleaning products. All of which sold out in that pre lockdown hoarding phase. The Government, media and supermarkets need to look at how they handled this part of the crisis. I think the workers movement need to hold an inquiry into the management of the whole event.

Food is a necessity so no supermarkets closed, but many supermarket shop workers decided to shield. From what I've heard, a lot of these were women workers who were looking after older or vulnerable relatives. Those that came into work had to be so careful - sometimes supplies of hand cleanser were unacceptably delayed meaning workers could be put at risk. Perspex screens were placed around tills but workers still had to stock shelves with customers in close proximity, even if floor markings were in place which were intended to give 2m distance.

Some shops gave bonuses to workers for attendance but generally the show was kept going by those on the minimum wage (£8.72/hr age 25+). Sure, shop workers were included in the weekly clap for key workers, but they had no special priority status for personal protective equipment or other extra special perks such as free taxi rides, meals or the front of queues.

Now that the intense period of crisis is passing, those bonuses are being withdrawn and, worryingly, some shops that closed for lockdown may be closed down for good. It's a tough time for retail workers as management demand a greater intensity of work and well known high street stores are shutting up shop completely.

By Barney, a railway guard

It has been very strange as a guard during Covid. Eerily quiet at times. Especially after the 23 March lockdown. Staying at least six feet from others makes camaraderie with work colleagues and the regulars on the trains is a big miss. It makes the working day go a lot longer. I'd rather be busy.

Train services across the country have been extremely punctual. Hardly any delays nationally. The emergency timetable is working well.

And PPE? What PPE? The lack of Government testing leaves this wide open. A lot of vulnerable staff are off 12 weeks anyway. I am sure there are many staff whose bad cold they had in February was Covid. It would be nice to know. It will be discussed at next RMT union meeting. I think trades unions have been very important during this national emergency. Management has realised this. I did smile when Michael Gove 'thanked our friends in the trade union movement.' That must have hurt him !!!!! Not sure staff even realize we are nationalised until at least September 2020. Be nice if it stays that way. And there are more staff at ticket barriers. Yes ! I hope you are all keeping well.

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Royal Mail Norwich by a postal worker

We have been faced for some time with a management that takes liberties and the covid crisis has just given them more opportunities. They wanted to introduce new working practices to make us like Amazon and now they can just bypass the union and break all the agreements. Our workplace is not safe as social distancing is not enforced and if you don't like it they tell you 'to go and work at Asda'. There's loads of bullying by managers and new staff don't know what to do. And no letter deliveries on Saturdays.

We've talked about strike action but we know that the post is a lifeline for many people.

Royal Mail have just sacked their CEO Rico Back, after only two years in the job. Back's final pay-off will be close to £1 million pounds. He was working from home in his £2.3 million penthouse in Switzerland. He refused to announce executive pay cuts during the pandemic and only belatedly cancelled executive bonuses.

Back's sacking has been met with satisfaction by many postal workers but it would be a mistake to believe that Royal Mail will halt its planned attacks on pay and working conditions. New CEO Keith Williams has been chosen by the board for precisely the same purpose as Back—to rapidly grow shareholders' profits through an increased exploitation of the workforce. He has already promised "an accelerated pace of change across the business."

# An inside view from a trade union employee in East Anglia

Looking back over March, April and May. I can only describe the feeling as being run over by a ten tonne truck and it is only now that we are now managing to keep on top of calls and Emails to support members as quickly as they deserve and I would like. It has been stressful and at times heart breaking hearing what members have experienced and feared. We have managed to get back to everyone on the same working day or refer the query to the right Representative or even recommend the most appropriate trade union to join. We know TU membership has declined. Increasingly Individualism seems to have thrived and collective action withered. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic trade unions

were like the government slow to grasp the magnitude of what was looming. I too woefully under-estimated the impact. It's not that I'm complacent or didn't know what was happening as the nightly TV news gave the latest devastating developments, surely the UK can't be like Italy?

I recall receiving our first query about lack of sick pay for a care worker being made to self-isolate in February. There was no provision for workers having to self-isolate in the beginning. The care home concerned didn't pay a penny in sick pay and left our member completely skint. This was before the government marginally improved the statutory sick pay rules from day one instead of day four in early March. What do you say to that, you can't shame the company because they will easily identify the source and probably dismiss the worker concerned. The local and County Councils in my part of Anglia have grasped the seriousness of the situation and on the whole treated their employees as best they could and worked in the spirit of the government lockdown advice. However if you happened to work for a contracted-out support company in a hospital then you would get no PPE because their employer couldn't up their game whereas the NHS directly employed staff did- completely crazy situation. Any system is only as strong as its weakest link – how can we have two sets of workers being treated so differently and putting the privatised workers and lowest paid at the greatest risk, yet alone the patients and NHS worker's too. Fortunately PPE pressures have eased. We know in the Midlands and London that keyworkers have died because of lack of PPE this to me is criminal. Will there be a prosecution for these unnecessary deaths?

My union, along with the other big unions which straddle the public and private sectors diverged from the governments' ineptness and increasingly got its act together. My fears in these early days wrongly envisaged hundreds, if not low thousands of resignations due to companies going insolvent or members blaming the union for



Panic at No 10 as covid 'Cummings and Goings' revealed.  
With apologies to Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*

the situation, for our relative powerlessness to "magic up" PPE which was as likely to be found as rocking horse manure. One Employer even asked if we could provide it for their employee's welfare, as I assume they didn't give a flying fig and take the pandemic seriously for their care home.

Eventually even the government got its act together with the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme on 20 March which permitted the furloughing of zero hours workers as well as employees who were part time and full-time. I cannot emphasise enough how important this was and the TUC's input into making this happen. And yes union membership has surged because I think the penny has really dropped. This Conservative government is not and has never been

the worker's friend. Many unions have had surges in membership. In fact my branch has had more members join in a week than usually join in a month for weeks now. The question is how do we support and build on this to increase the confidence of organised labour in the face of such a callous and incompetent government? Is there an appetite for increased militancy when so many jobs are outsourced to the lowest bidder and precariousness of employment is still the order of the day and a recession is an absolute inevitability?

The trade unions have been instrumental in leading the fight back and trying to tip the balance. People contacting us have been at times in despair with the Covid risks at work for them, or their families. It is deeply moving to hear men and women break down in tears on the telephone. Others have lost their regular work from their zero-hours contracts drying up and been in financial dire straits with all that entails. Telling people to go online and claim Universal Credit is not why I wanted to get involved in Trade Unions or telling members the rate of statutory sick pay of £95.85. Virtually everyone who works in the privatised social care sector gets zero sick pay. To excuse the pun it sickens me and makes me angry. Another running argument we and our members has had is with Care Homes who categorically refuse to furlough staff who require to be shielded because of their health conditions. This is permitted, yet only one Care Home Employer has so far done so. It is so frustrating knowing that instead of being on SSP an employee could receive 80% of their wages.

This is now eclipsing workers in social care and leading to another surge in new members of all ages. What I want to see is for these new members to be not just paying their subs but to want to become committed trade unionists, workplace Stewards and Activists and challenge the status quo. To borrow Sam Cooke's lyrics "A change is gonna come" We just have to work collectively to make that happen. 2020 will be the year when public consciousness and values change for the better.