

# KEY WORKERS UNITED

Norwich, No 4, January 2021

## What a carve-up!

A food retail worker

WHAT I FEEL most compelled to mention is my awareness of how working through this pandemic has affected my heightened reaction to things. Firstly - I appear to have developed 'selective mask rage.' Selective, because of course it's fine for the sweet old lady not to have covered her nose. But absolutely NOT fine for the driver, collecting an order for a household with covid to come in with a mask under their chin. We are not allowed to comment on this for our own safety apparently so nothing to do with money, of course.

Secondly, I have developed 'selective management rage'. At store level, they're under massive pressure and doing a great job. They listen to our thoughts and opinions, and as union rep, I am able to put my ideas surrounding covid safety measures forward and some of which have been acted upon.

The 'rage' comes in at corporate level, and here are some of the reasons why (and I will try and contain myself!).

As a 'thank you' for our hard work during this pandemic we got to open a 'virtual advent calender' for 12 days during December. We were genuinely excited at the prospect of 12 gifts of some sort, and were very happy with two of them: A 50% off own brand shopping for one day, plus, just over 4 hours pay to spend in store.

The remaining 10 days were centred around thanking other people. Examples being: a free tin of sweets to give to a friend as a thank you; '5 gold rings', (phone 5 people to thank them for something) Then, post a virtual 'thank you' to a colleague on a virtual wall, (whatever that might mean.)

Surprisingly enough, every single one of us are already very comfortable indeed with thanking people in our daily lives. Many of us, you may be amazed to hear, are not strangers to the beauty of practicing gratitude, it is already who we are. We really didn't need to be told how or when to be grateful, especially when it's dressed up as a thank you to us for our hard work.

### MASSIVELY PATRONISING.

On 50% day, the instructions were no more than 3 of anything, and not to forget that some colleagues won't shop until the evening, so save some for them. Perfectly fair enough. Early that morning,



a very high up corporate colleague, who really does live in a very big house in the country, loaded 2 large trollies with 3 of absolutely EVERYTHING. Once at the checkout, mask dangling from ear, they told us smugly how they were shopping also for other households as well. I still struggle to find a suitable adjective for how I felt in that moment. This is my experience of the covid situation in my tiny little world. Believe me, I really am so grateful for my job, my wonderful colleagues, my sons, my cats, and so many of our lovely customers.

Much love to all.

## Winners and Losers

Attila the shelf stacker.

Winners and losers. I hate that expression, to me it epitomises the last 40 years - of individualising us away from the collective, of blaming ourselves and not the system we're in - and in retail you hear it a lot now, so let's have a look at it in various forms. Well firstly, though the pandemic, some retailers have done well and others poorly. E-commerce of course has done very well on a business model that goes like this: product made in Far East using cheap labour and minimal regulation, ship to UK warehouse, online order pick using agency labour in warehouse on minimum wage and flexible hours contract, despatch using bogus self-employed couriers. On the other hand traditional high street retailing has taken a huge hit and big names are falling.

Employers use the term winners and losers with their staff. The term "Loser" is used to criticise staff. For example,

we've had in our canteen posted up league tables of staff with ratings based on various performance criteria. Remember, this is staff on the minimum wage - but I think it's wrong in any work environment. Then there is the "You are the difference" programme - an intensive selling method based on performance and motivational talks - rather like a cult behaves to make its members dependent and obedient to its leaders.

The foundation of "You are the difference" is the spiral of negativity. Staff can have their names written on "post it" stickers and these can be placed on the spiral which is drawn on a large sheet of paper. You are actively encouraged to call those at the bottom of the spiral "Negs". Everybody is different and all can do a good job, but not everybody has the joys of spring all the time and discrediting people and ranking them this way is cruel.

Finally I come to redundancy. Just before Christmas many of the returning furloughed workers were sacked. Why when the furlough scheme was extended? Nobody from management could say. Ten days from the announcement to being shown the door. It stinks.

# Socialists, trade unionists and educationalists against Coronavirus

Ian Duckett, Secretary SEA East of England branch and EC member Norfolk NEU



NEU campaigning in the 2019 election

THE BBC'S NEWSNIGHT Special Coronavirus: 'How Britain's invisible children are being forgotten', (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0892xt2>) provided great insight into the social, economic and health crises. The numbers of at-risk children taking their crisis place in a school is frighteningly low and the most economically disadvantaged are without the free school meals service, in some areas as low as 10%. It has got much worse since then.

The Socialist Educational Association (SEA) supports the education unions in calling for on-line learning in all schools nationally apart from for children of key workers and vulnerable children whilst the lock down continues. During this period of closure we call on the DFE to work with stakeholders including all education unions to come up with a plan to deliver the best and safest education possible for pupils in these challenging circumstances. We call on the DFE to allow schools to be flexible in implementing this plan depending on their context and we call on the government to cancel SATS and replace public examinations with moderated teacher assessments.

NEU has repeatedly asked the government to work with us to make schools and colleges safe but the logic of a system which puts the financial benefit of the few before the safety and welfare of the many, has seen them ignore us. In June, NEU asked them to invest in additional staff and space to make social distancing possible. They ignored us.

In September, we called on them to implement a proper recovery plan, including the use of blended learning to ensure our children miss as little as possible of their education. They ignored us. In October, we called for a circuit break over half term, to reduce rapidly rising infection rates and prevent chaos in the autumn term as schools, classes and bubbles were repeatedly opened and closed as they were hit by the virus. They ignored us. In November, we called for schools and colleges to be included in the national lockdown, as all the scientific evidence showed that, without such measures, it would be ineffective. They ignored us.

In December, they went one step further when they chose to ignore the advice of their own Scientific Advisory Group for

Emergencies that reopening schools and colleges in January would lead to the R rate remaining above 1 and a growth in infection, hospitalisation and death. This advice was withheld by government and only published on December 31. Our schools are between a rock and a hard place; our children are stranded on the cusp between education and social care. We need support from across the labour movement in taking this difficult step, from unions, from councillors, and from MPs.

## LUCAS AID

The Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee's Alternative Corporate Plan (known widely as the Lucas Plan) was launched in 1976; it rapidly became an international cause celebre. The Plan was unique in that trade unionists, for the first time, proposed a radical alternative to job losses in the arms industry by expanding the workforce to manufacture alternative products which were socially useful, whilst using human centred design and production methods to maximise skills and abilities. (New website : [thelucasaerocombineshopstewardscommittee.org/](http://thelucasaerocombineshopstewardscommittee.org/))

The Plan, which proposed a wide range of products designed primarily by the workforce – including wind turbines, hybrid cars, energy efficient housing, as well as much needed medical equipment – attracted widespread national and international recognition as a positive alternative to unemployment and recession; it also identified how technology could be used to answer society's unmet needs. Nominated in 1982 for the Nobel Peace Prize, interest in the now 45-year-old Plan endures as the social and environmental problems it tackled are still with us, only so much more urgent.

Today, as the economy develops post pandemic, radical changes will be necessary if the UK is to meet the targets required to tackle climate change. Organised labour will lose out unless it takes the initiative. We developed our Plan in 1976 as an alternative to the tendency of trade unions to all too often be on the receiving end, reacting defensively to profit-driven corporate decision-making. We believe that workers' plans, as an alternative to market driven company plans, are needed if we are to transition production post-pandemic towards a Green New Deal, rather than simply have long term, too often un-met, targets set by central government. Workers developing alternative plans for their workplaces, is a significant concrete means of really levelling up society, through a participatory democracy where the balance of power shifts towards them.

To this end, we remaining members of the Lucas Aerospace Combine considered that now is the time, for the first time, to put together our own unique website to detail our Combine's history and key information related to the Lucas Plan campaign. This wealth of information is being provided to inform and assist other trade unionists, activists and organisations who may wish to draw upon the Plan and our experience campaigning for it.