

# CROYDON KICK OFF

Croydon's Best (and Only!) Worker's Newspaper

Covering Croydon, Mitcham, Thornton Heath, Norbury and Coulsdon

CROYDON  
SOLIDARITY  
NETWORK

OCTOBER 2020



## IN THIS ISSUE

### PAGE 1

- Taking back control (for real)

### PAGE 2

- Croydon Council In Crisis
- The Shed - Workers' lives at risk at Croydon UPS

### PAGE 3

- Greedy Tesco – store staff told to clean
- Working at Costco - a worker's account

### PAGE 4

- Bezos counts his billions whilst drivers work for peanuts, but change is coming

### PAGE 5

- Capitalism and Racism

## CROYDON SOLIDARITY NETWORK ABOUT US

We are a network of workers and locals based around the warehouses and factories of Croydon, Mitcham and Purley Way. We are not a charity or a business and we're not after your money. Instead, we're building a network of working-class people who can support each other with problems at work, with landlords and in the community.

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# TAKING BACK CONTROL (FOR REAL)

It is a strange world. We spend more time at work than with our friends and family. Work eats up our life, but we see work as separate from life. We don't want to take work seriously, because we, as humans, are not taken seriously at work. The creativity and life energy of billions is wasted in the way work is organised in the current system.

## Democracy? You must be kidding!

They tell us that we live in a democracy – but at the place where we spend most of our life, we have little to nothing to say. The way work is organised makes it very difficult to make friends or be friends at work: the machine is too loud, the line too fast to be able to talk (often we are told off for talking 'too much'), people come and go so we might think "why bother getting to know them?", some people think they get easier work if they show that they are better workers than the 'lazy' others – a feeling of competition is encouraged, despite all the 'team work' talk. Work is soulless and makes us feel half-human, so how can we connect to others?

## Small steps to take back control – for real!

It is true, we don't control what is happening in our company, what is produced and how, who is hired and fired and why. But we can start with creating a little breathing space for ourselves and others, some space against productivity targets and for friendliness.

- Ease the work pressure and try not to compete with your co-workers. Don't work faster than the average, try to work a bit slower and give more time to your fellow humans. Encourage others to do so.
- Don't complain about fellow workers to supervisors and management. Try to speak to your colleagues directly. If the problem is more serious, talk to other colleagues you trust about it. Together you will find a solution.
- Be friendly to new starters, to agency workers – even if you think that they might not stay long. Explain to them how things work and that they should not kill themselves for a minimum wage.
- Show support when fellow workers are shouted at, disciplined or bullied by managers. Even if it just means going up to them and asking if they are okay. If you are a bigger group you can stand up to the manager and ask for an apology.
- Let's try to talk to people during our break, instead of staring into our mobile phones. Let's talk about the weather, about work, about life. Let's try to overcome language divisions – not everyone is confident in English, so be patient if people make the effort.
- Try to work as little overtime as possible – although everyone needs the extra-money, this is more of a short-term carrot: in the long run they will make us work longer hours for the same money.

## We can ask for more!

These are just small steps, but they help to change the atmosphere at work. They can also help us to ask for more. This will not happen overnight, nor do we have to wait until everyone is on board. We can start with our immediate colleagues who we trust.

There are always small conflicts with management: about work speed, about overtime, about shifting us to worse jobs or shifts, about promised permanent contracts, about cuts in bonuses, about disciplinary procedures...

We often accept these changes, saying that we can't do anything or that 'the other workers won't join'. In order to justify our fear of doing anything we often say: "the only option would be if everyone goes on strike, but they don't". But there are smaller steps we can take, which don't make us too vulnerable.

- Find a small group of colleagues to start with, even four-five-six will do.
- Talk about what small things you can do that would annoy management and will let them know that people are not happy with the changes.
- This could be a hidden 'work-to-rule': colleagues at different jobs sticking to the official company procedures and health and safety regulations. Only do the jobs you are supposed to do according to your contract. This normally slows down work quite a lot.
- An unofficial overtime boycott can be another way to show that you are pissed off without sticking your neck out too far. The more people join in, the more effective it is.
- Do your work, but stop communicating with management, don't say "hello" or "goodbye" to them. If a whole department sticks to this, they will feel the pain over time and might reconsider the changes.
- Find ways to put forward your demands without having to send a spokesperson – management will either punish them or buy any 'leaders'. We need collective action, not heroes!\* Find ways to speak to workers in other departments and encourage them to do similar things. This could be at meetings after work, through whatsapp or other ways.
- Sometimes it bothers management if the media or clients of the company get to know that their employees are unhappy, that time targets or quality might be compromised. You can do or threaten to do this without having to show your face to management.

There are many creative ways of how we can put pressure on the bosses. The more people join the better. But even a small group can annoy management. The challenge is just to keep your heads down and avoid an open fight that we might lose.

Over the summer months it has emerged that Croydon Council intends to make 15% of its workforce redundant, up to 500 workers. Council leaders have insisted this is necessary after the Council's budget was found to be in deficit by over £60 million, citing the effects of Covid as the reason for the overspend. However, the apparent urgency of these cuts has not translated to a review of the salaries of those in the senior leadership team, with the chief executive earning over £200,000 a year.

What this may mean for services provided by the Council is not yet clear but some departments may see up to a quarter of staff made redundant. This could include housing support, disability services, refuse collection and the list goes on. With Britain confirmed to have entered recession, these services are more essential than ever and yet, Croydon residents will be facing stripped back public services. Not to mention the Council workers facing unemployment and the effect this will have on the living standards of them and their families. Remember how we used to clap for these workers every Thursday evening?

The larger trade unions often have relatively high members amongst public service workers, and Croydon Council is no different. UNISON, Unite \*\*and GMB each have hundreds of members in this workplace. For now it's unclear how they will be responding to these redundancies. A protest was organised by the three unions in early August, and they have also produced a petition together with a public statement against the job cuts. However, when we leafleted

Croydon Council offices, as well as being fearful of the cuts, staff that were spoken to seemed to be unclear about what the overall strategy of the unions was. There has been no concrete signs of industrial action being taken as of yet.



UNISON referenced the local Labour Party's stance on local government funding.

However, what is the discussion here? Is it just about whether the central government is giving councils enough cash? Because if we look at it that way, then it's so easy for the Labour-run council to say its hands are tied. The fact that not a single Croydon Labour councillor or MP signed the petition circulated by the unions seems to suggest that that is indeed going to be their line. This could leave the workforce to fall in line with this management logic and plead for further funds. When it comes to Boris Johnson's government, it's probably best not to hold your breath on that one. Instead, we would suggest looking to the top of the council. As well as the Chief Executive, there are a further 20 executives on six figure salaries, surely each of them should be taking pay cuts before the first job goes.

Our message to workers; don't wait. The unions can be slow to mobilise and willing to cut deals with senior management without consulting the workers. Tower Hamlets Council workers engaged in strike action over July and August over the implementation of a regressive new contract. The pickets were well attended, the feeling often militant, and yet Greater London UNISON (the same regional structure as Croydon) prevented the local branch from taking five days of continuous action and is seemingly against a re-ballot for further strikes, despite the fact the overwhelming majority of workers voted for this. It's important to add that despite the obstacles facing Tower Hamlets council workers, the strike action and public pressure seems to have yielded results. The Labour mayor has agreed to hold talks after months of deadlock.

If you're a Council worker (or know one) and you're reading this, what are your colleagues saying about it? Do you want to take some action? Can we give you some advice on how you might do that? Get in touch.

## THE SHED - WORKERS' LIVES AT RISK AT CROYDON UPS

At the UPS off Beddington Way, workers are having to put themselves at risk on a daily basis. We visited UPS one weekday night. We were told that a shed off the main building is close to collapse. This small building, which you can see from the main entrance, is where lots of the equipment used by workers to load and unload lorries is stored. To try and safely access this equipment, workers have taken to going with each other to the shed, one holding the building upright as best they can, whilst the other quickly goes in to grab what they need. Workers have been raising this issue with management for months, both with their agency and UPS directly. And yet nothing has been done. The workers we spoke to said it was 'a matter of time' before something serious happened.

Back in May, we heard reports from workers at Dartford UPS that at least a few people had died after contracting Covid-19 at the workplace. It therefore appears that UPS' neglect for its staff health and wellbeing spans more than one of their locations.

In our conversation with the UPS workers in Croydon, they told us they were keen to organise and try and do something about it. We'll be back there in the coming weeks to help set something up. However, if the UPS workers' experience sounds similar to your own, why not talk to your colleagues about it? See what worries them about their day to day work, and who would be up for getting together to do something.

# GREEDY TESCO – STORE STAFF TOLD TO CLEAN

The pandemic saw increased sales for supermarkets across the UK, Tesco in particular with its huge high street presence, as well as their massive online operation. And despite this, in nearly 2,000 Metro and Express stores, they are getting rid of contract cleaners. Instead, in store staff will be washing windows and floors, alongside other cleaning duties. Odd timing given that hygiene standards have never been more important.

A Tesco Metro worker we spoke to said that this announcement has been met with anger and upset in his store. Saying; “this seems to be a punitive choice in response to our hard work to feed the nation during this global pandemic.”

Tesco has used the pandemic to its advantage since the beginning, taking the business rate tax exemption (around £500 million) in March, to then pay a £635 million dividend to its shareholders in April.

Tesco has also employed 45,000 extra staff to expand their profits, but on temporary contracts with no sick pay and restrictive conditions. Lots of those who took on these temporary contracts were those out of work as a result of the lockdown, a fact which Tesco was quick to capitalise on with these exploitative contracts. And the reward for thousands of those workers? Extra duties. Tesco isn't interested in 'feeding the nation' or looking after its workforce, but maximising profits for its shareholders.



## WORKING AT COSTCO - A WORKER'S ACCOUNT

The following article is an anonymous first person account of a worker at Costco in Croydon, detailing their experiences during the early days of the government imposed lockdown following the pandemic.

I have been working with Costco for more than half a decade now. Don't get me wrong, Costco isn't as bad as some retailers. The pay and conditions have some benefits. However, the way they (Costco UK) handled the early days of the pandemic by enforcing a strict employees-only mask rule and temperature checks whilst not implementing the same to customers and the general public, reeked of hypocrisy.

I had actually spoken about this particular issue with my union rep, who shockingly replied that it would be best to wait for government legislation before taking any action against the company. Totally disillusioned by his reply, I told him if Costco in America (having the highest virus death toll in the world) could implement compulsory mask wearing to both employees and customers before entering their premises, then why couldn't their counterparts in the UK do the same?



The rep went on to say that I should just be patient and wait for the legislation to come. By then, I had already made up my mind to cancel my two and a half year membership with a union who I had thought would actually stand up for their workers when they really needed them. Until then, I had not paid heed to numerous bits of advice from friends and co-workers that all these big unions were nothing but a sham. To fool the workers in the garb of being guardians' of workers rights. I thought to myself that the step taken by Costco US showed that they were at least taking some steps to safeguard their employees.

A couple of months later, after the legislation made it mandatory for masks to be worn before entering retail premises, only then did Costco extend the mask policy to customers as well. But by then, the damage had already been done. I lost my faith in the management of the UK operations who to me seemed to see just money and profits before employee health and safety, despite our store being one of the busiest amongst their branches. The kind of attitude, greed and apathy, that made the pandemic worse in the first place.

Ultimately, I realised I was still a sheep, slogging everyday to pay our bills and to keep our lives afloat, and that the only way to bring about a change in this flawed system was to rebel and speak up against it. Until then, it'll just be business as normal, not only for me but for those countless other friends and family of mine who've gone through hell with their jobs because of this system, made worse by the pandemic.

# BEZOS COUNTS HIS BILLIONS WHILST DRIVERS WORK FOR PEANUTS, BUT CHANGE IS COMING

Amazon was one of the companies with the biggest profits during the lockdown. At the end of July they reported a 40% rise in net sales for the second quarter compared to the same time last year. From \$63.4 billion in the same quarter last year to \$88.9 this quarter. This has put a lot of pressure on the delivery drivers and the rest of the workforce. Even with the 175,000 new people hired worldwide, most of them in part-time positions, the workers are struggling to cope with the increased workloads.

This is something that has certainly been felt over the last three months at the Amazon Croydon depot. Piles of parcels sit on the passenger seats next to the van drivers, with no room left in the back. But instead of an increase in pay, most have seen a decrease. Drivers are now having to deliver 250-300 items per shift, with up to 150 stops. This is a significant increase on pre-pandemic levels and is as high as what drivers see during the Christmas period. But as of June, Amazon cut its global pandemic bonus to workers. Drivers are now paid around £126 per shift for a typical medium-size van. This used to be £146 and many jobs are still advertising the increased pay, despite it having been scrapped. Shifts are in theory for nine hours, with a 30 minute break. We're yet to meet a driver who has managed to take one of these breaks.

Many drivers complain of not getting enough shifts from Amazon. Most want to be doing five days, and some six. It's pointed out that the cost of the van rent is per week, not per day. So if you're not doing many days then you're not making much money. Some drivers are only doing three or four days and they have to pay around £250 a week for the van, plus the fuel costs. A smaller number of drivers complained of working too much, e.g. being asked to come on Sundays, having to do seven days etc. So much for the apparent freedom this job is advertised as bringing, instead it sounds far more like it's all on Amazon's terms.



A further development is that Amazon have opened another depot in Croydon, just off the Purley Way. They are supposed to hire at least 150 new workers; drivers, pickers, IT, engineers and others. This means that Amazon is getting ready for the Christmas season and a possible second lockdown.

It's almost impressive how ruthless Amazon is in using the pandemic and its acceleration of logistical growth to maximise their profits with the drivers working under extremely exploitative conditions. This can't go on. Anger is already bubbling amongst Amazon drivers. But the nature of the precarious working conditions, temporary contracts, and agency in between, make it very difficult to talk with your workmates about how to organise and do something. However, what we would say is nothing is impossible. Amazon relies on the work of drivers, delivering tens of thousands of packages a day. Amazon would certainly take notice if that were to be disrupted. Workers have spoken positively about ideas of calling a meeting before work starts one Saturday, if this sounds good to you, get in touch. Let's do something, Bezos can afford to put his hand in his pocket, he might just need a bit of encouragement.



# CAPITALISM AND RACISM

Capitalism thrives on the exploitation of just about anything it can get its hands on, whether that be people, animals, or the earth and its resources, and racism is a tool that has been used throughout history to justify this exploitation and oppression. In the context of the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that re-ignited after another murder of an innocent black man by cops in the US, it is important to remember how we got to this position. A position where human life is valued so little, and valued even less if it's the life of a black person.

We got to this position because the society we live in today is based on the same principles of imperialism, exploitation and greed that saw Africa brutally invaded and Africans enslaved by western empires back in the day. European intellectuals pushed the idea of white supremacy whilst dehumanising black people, so that the enslavement of other human beings could be justified, and the wealth that they generated stolen. This system and these ideas didn't just disappear when slavery was abolished or when civil rights legislation was passed in more recent history. These are just examples of the system adapting and evolving to try and disguise itself. The fundamental principles of dehumanisation and exploitation remain, and this is why the fight against racism remains.

For the struggle against racism to be carried out effectively and ever have a chance of being truly triumphant, it must be based on the abolition of capitalism. It must be based on the idea that we CAN build another world, free from all oppression. A world where we don't have to keep fighting brainwashed fascists every time they rear their ugly mugs, as they will no longer hate their fellow workers but their capitalist oppressors instead. This can only be done if the divisive capitalist narratives pushed by the likes of The Sun are challenged with an anti-racist class conscious analysis, as well as effective and practical organisation within our class.



Photo by Graham Land [www.grahamland.photography](http://www.grahamland.photography)

You only have to look at the aggressive gentrification of Croydon and areas across London to see how issues that affect working class people almost always disproportionately affect black communities. Instead of allowing neoliberal values of individualism to seep into our politics and make us separate our struggles into merely personal ones, we should focus on the issues we have in common and organise around those. But it is no accident that our class is so divided, with many working class white people believing they have more in common with the likes Jacob Rees Mogg than their fellow workers who may come from different places in the world. Capitalism knows that it is in trouble if working class people from all over the world come together and organise themselves, which is why it pushes so much bullshit to make us hate each other and fuel the flames of racist bigotry. This is why the CIA has put so much work and resources in to try and separate national liberation struggles in Africa and the Caribbean from a Marxist outlook. Babylon knows that when the workers of the world unite, it's peak for them and their evil system.

Black Lives Matter should not be seen as a solo movement exclusively for black people and nobody else, but in the wider context of a system imploding. From environmental destruction and war, to terrorism and a global pandemic, capitalism is destroying itself. However our resistance must be based on the new world we want to create, not personal struggles and virtue signalling. We have to work out how we're going to create that world, and for me anti-racist working class unity is the key.



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