

UK supermarket worker: “The ‘choice’ from Asda is no choice—you sign or you’re out of a job”

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Asda supermarket workers protesting in Leeds Wednesday against the imposition of a new inferior “Contract 6.”

Sarah has worked at the Asda store in Leeds for 15 years. She said, “We’ve already had one to one’s [meetings with management] at our store—two within a week, the third two weeks later. They’re all done and dusted within a month. I have an operation next month. If I wouldn’t sign, I wouldn’t get my sick pay. They had me over a barrel. I think the majority have signed it now. They don’t want to lose their jobs.

“The GMB should have done something far earlier. This is a new contract with even worse conditions. I worked here at night till 6 o’clock in the morning. You would get half an hour break and a 15-minute break. On the new contract all you would get is a half an hour break. On the old Contract 6 you had to work two bank holidays but on this one we are forced to work three bank holidays at normal pay.”

Lisa has worked for more than 25 years in stores in Leeds and Bradford: “We totally disagree with the contract that gives us no choice. We have to work bank holidays. It is now so inflexible we could have to work at any time between 5 a.m. and 10 o’clock at night. Anyone could have their department changed and their hours changed at any time.

“Staff have to sign up and if they don’t sign up for it, they could potentially be given three weeks’ notice.

“At the moment, I am doing 24 hours a week, but once my paid breaks are taken off me, they are going down to 23 hours. If they feel there are too many people on one department, they could shift us from one department to another and put us on different shifts.”

Due to her long service, Lisa said, “I have generated

extra holidays that I will lose once I go onto Contract 6. As far as I am aware it will be three days lost. It’s all about saving money for them. It’s about the bottom line. Colleagues are stressed out about this. They have gone into the one-to-one meetings [with line managers] and they are not able to sleep.

“My determination is to stick to my guns and say no. The reason why we are here today is to let them know that we are not happy. I think it is disgraceful the way they are treating us. It is making people so stressed out that they are just caving in.

“As soon as the unions had finished their negotiations with Asda we were straight into our one-to-one’s. They pushed us through as quickly as they could to hit their deadline of November 2, or you are out of a job.

“The GMB sat down at the table with Asda to discuss alternatives to Contract 6 they were proposing. They came up with a couple of things that they cut down on and they were going to give us. I think they were going to give us two weeks’ notice, which they have increased to three weeks. They have given us a 10-minute window for clocking out. Colleagues that work four hours won’t get a break under Contract 6. But should you go one minute past your scheduled time, it would have knocked 15 minutes off, so they have had to put a 10-minute window in order to make sure colleagues get clocked out in time.

“So really we have not gained a lot back from Asda and as soon as the discussions were over it was straight away getting us into the one-to-ones.

“I am doubtful if I am going to sign the contract because it’s so unfair ... How can you plan anything if you think in three weeks you are going to be potentially shifted to a different department on different hours?”

Lisa's friend said, "We have a colleague who has just had a breast removed. They say they will come to her house to sign the contract and she does not want Asda at her house. It's disgusting. It's disgraceful. People are going through their own stresses and then someone knocking at your door and adding to that stress and saying you need to sign this."

John has worked in an Asda store in Hull for 35 years. He said, "They are taking our rights off us ... It's been fought for, we've earned them."

"What Asda have done is take on many new people and they are already on the new contract. But we have not signed for those contracts. We don't agree; it's been forced on us. Would the CEO sign a contract where he is going to be earning less, working bank holidays for no extra money, having to work bank holidays? At one time you used to get paid double time on bank holidays. It's cut and cut and cut all the time. Now it's down to time and a fifth."

"They have already taken on a load of new workers and they have asked us to train them—in every single department, because that is the flexibility. We are worse off with the new contract. I am going to be on less money. I will be £500 a year worse off. And that's not including my eight days public holidays."

Mary has worked at Asda for more than 25 years: "They're paying a transitional payment, but on the same page it says they reserve the right to cancel it. And they wouldn't have written that on if they had any intention of paying it. They think we're thick. Come Easter when the new national minimum wage comes in, the transitional payments will be stopped."

"The 'choice' from Asda is no choice: you sign or you're out of a job. I am on 12 weeks' notice. Unfortunately, people with young kids, people with mortgages, they just can't afford to say no. But if they don't fight it now, in five years' time when something else crops up the company can save another £10 billion. They can say, 'We want you this week, we don't want you the next.'

"It was only two years ago we were told this is a new contract, prior to this one we are seeing now. They said, 'Nobody will be forced to work, you will do two bank holidays a year, nobody will be forced to sign it, blah, blah, blah. It's all voluntary.'

"What does it bode for the future for young kids that join the company now? They won't ever get

mortgages."



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