

**COVID-19  
Coronavirus**

**Guidance to unions**

## **1. Understanding the issue**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented situation for public health and the economy. This guide is for trade union reps, designed to give you an understanding of the workplace issues in the context of COVID-19, and to provide support in being effective at negotiating with employers steps that can be taken to best protect the health and safety of the workforce.

### **What is coronavirus?**

Coronavirus is a group of viruses which normally cause mild illness, with symptoms similar to a common cold. Novel coronavirus is the term used for strains not previously identified in humans. The latest strain, first identified in December 2019 in China, has now formally been named SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease known as COVID-19.

Symptoms can include a fever, fatigue, dry cough and difficulty breathing. A number of other symptoms have also been reported, and many carriers, particularly if they are healthy, may experience no symptoms whatsoever. Following transmission, symptoms take an average of 5 days to begin – this differs to flu viruses which tend to incubate very quickly.

The disease is air-borne and contracted by breathing in viral droplets, ejected during coughing, sneezing or even breathing. The virus cannot survive on non-living objects for more than a few hours.

In more severe cases, the virus can cause pneumonia, an infection which causes inflammation of the lungs and greater

breathing difficulties. This is life threatening. While everyone is at risk of contracting COVID-19, the risk complications and death is higher for certain groups, particularly those over the age of 65 or with certain existing health conditions.

### **What is a 'pandemic'?**

A pandemic is an outbreak that affects hundreds of millions of people worldwide, leading to a large proportion of them becoming ill. Pandemics occur when a virus with very different features emerges. Because it is new, people have little or no immunity to it.

Normally there are around two or three such pandemics every century. The most recent was in 2009 with the H1N1 virus, commonly referred to as 'swine flu'. Around half a million people died globally. An earlier outbreak of the same H1N1 virus in 1918 caused an estimated 20-40 million deaths worldwide, mostly among people aged between 20 and 45.

As of 11th March, the World Health Organisation has defined the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic.

### **How does it spread?**

The main way the virus spreads is by contamination when someone carrying the virus coughs or sneezes. Viral droplets can travel up to six metres, making person-to-person transmission particularly likely.

Viruses can also spread through particles known as aerosols, released from the lungs. These can travel further and can remain in the air for hours, and studies show it

surviving on certain hard surfaces for up to three days.

## **Who should be in isolation?**

Current advice recommends that anyone who is able, should maintain social distancing and work from home where possible.

Anyone with suspected symptoms of COVID-19, or who has made contact with someone with symptoms, should self-isolate. You should stay at home, avoid unnecessary travel and not attend your place of work.

Anyone who has recently visited certain areas, or has had recent contact with someone who has, should isolate themselves. The list of high-risk areas is being updated by the government regularly, and the best source of accurate information is the [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) website.

The NHS has also issued advice to especially vulnerable people, who should limit social interactions and remain at home as much as possible, due to being at greater risk of complications from COVID-19. Specific health conditions include:

- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema or bronchitis
- chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
- chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis, a learning disability or cerebral palsy
- diabetes
- problems with your spleen – for example, sickle cell disease or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as HIV and AIDS, or medicines such as steroid tablets or chemotherapy
- being seriously overweight (a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above)
- those who are pregnant

In the week of 23rd March 2020, the NHS is planning to write to 1.5million of the most high risk people to ask them to self-isolate for 12 weeks.

## **How is it treated?**

There is currently no vaccine or medication for COVID-19. Scientists are trying to produce one but it is unlikely to be available before the virus has spread globally.

Medications used to treat the flu can reduce symptoms, such as coughing and aches and pains.

Current NHS advice is to avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID) drugs for pain relief, but not to stop if you have been advised to take these drugs for an inflammatory disease, such as arthritis. Paracetamol is a recommended alternative.

COVID-19 is particularly serious if the virus leads to pneumonia and other more acute respiratory diseases because these cannot be treated with antibiotics.

## 2. Why COVID-19 is an issue for trade unions

COVID-19 is already having an unprecedented effect on working life. Large numbers of the workforce are likely to be absent at any one time as the virus spreads.

This will include not only those who become ill, or must self-isolate, but following school part-closures, many workers with children will find it impossible to go to work. Likewise, those who have partners or dependents who become ill may also stay at home. This is having a major impact on all aspects of the economy as whole.

The TUC believes that trade unions and employers, working together, can make a significant difference to ensure that the effects of the outbreak are minimised, that the workforce is educated and informed on how to limit transmission, protected and equipped appropriately, and that there is no unnecessary panic.

Trade unions are already challenging employers and the government over inadequate sick pay offers, failure to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and the urgent need to safeguard jobs in disrupted industries.

Unions will play a major part in keeping infected workers at home and not in the workplace as a result of either through misplaced loyalty or employer pressure.

It is important that the effect of any pandemic does not disproportionately hit the most vulnerable, such as the low paid, those without permanent employment or sick pay schemes and those with dependents.

### Self-isolation

Self-isolation, or quarantine, is encouraged to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Anyone

who has, or who may have, been exposed to the virus is recommended to limit the number of people they come into contact with for 14 days.

The government and local health protection teams are advising people to self-isolate if they are:

- Waiting for a COVID-19 test result
- Identified as being a close contact of someone with coronavirus
- Returning from travel in certain locations. You can find an up-to-date list on the government's website: <https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/02/20/what-is-self-isolation-and-why-is-it-important/>

The government has also set out guidance on measures to take while in isolation, including interacting with other people in your home:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-self-isolation-for-patients-undergoing-testing/advice-sheet-home-isolation>

Some employers will also have their own recommendations and requirements for self-isolation.

### Home working

Employers have been instructed to allow working from home where possible.

There are measures that can be taken to ensure working from home is adequate. That means looking at issues around IT, including broadband capacity and the management and coordination of work. Issues reps should raise with bosses include:

- Ensuring their home is a safe, secure place of work, taking into account ergonomics.
- No worker is expected to pay for their own equipment i.e. computers or wifi.

- Workers continue to work their normal hours.
- Any benefits related to usual place of work are maintained (for example if lunch or childcare is paid for).
- Steps are taken to address concerns of isolation and loneliness.
- Unions should be consulted in any WFH policies

Another issue for trade unions is the fact that many workers, such as cleaners, are simply not able to work from home. The TUC is concerned that this may mean that there will be two tiers of staff with those unable to work from home, but who still have domestic responsibilities, being treated differently from those who can work from home if they need to care for a dependant and remote working arrangements should ensure that no staff are disadvantaged through not being able to work at home because of the nature of their job.

## **Public-facing workers**

In most workplaces, the risk of an outbreak is low. However, there are many sectors that may require more specific precautions. Those in public services and the service industry, who work with large numbers of the general public, will be at greater risk of exposure. Workers in public-facing roles will also be on the front-line of responding to COVID-19 and helping to limit its public health impact. Specific risk assessments under Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) should be performed in such workplaces. Unions representing NHS, social care, education, transport, prisons and other relevant sectors have produced specific guidance and are in contact with employer

organisations. The government has produced specific guidance to relevant sectoral employers: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covid-19-guidance-for-non-clinical-settings-and-the-public>, and reps should refer to any specific advice from their sector unions on measures being recommended: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/unions>

Where work involves visiting a person in their own home (such as care provision, maintenance work etc.) the employer should notify service users and customers that they should advise them if any person in the household is suffering from COVID-19 symptoms. If the work is non-urgent then no visits should take place for that period.

In the event of the visit being necessary, the employer should take steps to ensure that the employee is not put at risk with proper training and protective measures (see section on Personal Protective Equipment). These will vary depending on the circumstances, type of work and the level of contact with the infected person.

The government has suggested retired medical professionals could be called to help with the response. If retired staff do return to work, this should not have a negative impact on their pensions, and unions should raise this where it is proposed.

## **Dealing with sickness absence**

Some employers are planning for high rates of absenteeism. This is on the basis that it will not only be those who are ill that are unable to come into work, but also those looking after family members who are ill or those with children in the event of schools being closed. In addition, in the event of a severe pandemic, some staff will be afraid to

come into work for fear of contracting the virus. Public transport is also running at reduced capacity.

Trade unionists will have to ensure employers do not encourage staff to come in when ill, and that staff do not attempt to come to work through misguided loyalty to their employer, client or colleagues. It is important that staff who are ill remain at home until fully recovered.

It is likely that increased sickness absence may put pressure on other employees to work longer hours to cover for those who are off. Unions can remind employers that they will still be covered by the Working Time Regulations\* and it will not help if those employees who remain at work find their physical or mental health being undermined by excessive pressure – unions should raise this in any event of excessive overtime.

\*The rules on working hours have however been relaxed for drivers undertaking the carrying of goods. The daily working limit has temporarily been extended from 9 hours to 11 hours. More information can be found [here](#). Where any further relaxations are proposed, unions must be consulted.

## **Loss of pay**

In an effort to save jobs, the TUC made appeals to government to intervene and subsidise wages. Employers will now be able to apply to HMRC for a grant to cover 80% of workers' wages (up to a sum of £2,500 per month) in cases where they are unable to attend work due to service disruption or isolation. This can be backdated to 1st March 2020 and will be available for a three month period.

## **Statutory Sick pay**

The law on sick pay is complicated and affects sections of the workforce differently.

To qualify for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) you must:

- be classed as an employee
- have been ill for at least 4 days in a row (this can include non-working days), however the government has temporarily changed the rules on this meaning payment will come in from day 1 for COVID-19 symptoms or self-isolation.
- earn an average of at least £118 per week

Tell your employer you're sick before their deadline - or within 7 days if they do not have one

The SSP payment is currently £94.25 per week

However, you will not qualify if you:

- have already received the maximum amount of SSP, which is 28 weeks
- are already in receipt of Statutory Maternity Pay

You will also no longer be eligible for SSP if you have a continuous series of linked periods of illness that lasts more than 3 years.

If you fall into these categories, you may instead be able to apply for Universal Credit or Employment and Support Allowance, and the government has made temporary changes meaning you will not have to attend a Job Centre to do so. The rate of Universal Credit available to the self-employed has been temporarily increased to the equivalent of Statutory Sick Pay - £94 per week.

The government has also made emergency changes allowing small businesses with fewer than 250 employees to reclaim the

cost of SSP payments from the government, in addition to a loan and grant which can be accessed for disruption of service.

## **Occupational sick pay**

Most workers will receive sick pay as set out in their contracts, but there will be variations on this. Many employers will have an occupational sick pay offer, which will be more generous than Statutory Sick Pay; and in these cases unions should seek reassurances that this will be used for any time off needed from illness, and not included in any absence reviews.

It is in the employers' interest to pay a worker adequate sick pay if they fall ill or are required to self-isolate, otherwise they may be tempted to attend work despite symptoms or the risk of contaminating colleagues. This risks a higher number of absences in the long-run. For cases of isolation, unions have been calling for employers to pay full pay.

Some employers have been reported as asking workers to cover periods of self-isolation with annual leave or unpaid leave. This is completely unacceptable, and unions

should resist any moves along those lines. Not only will it mean that staff will be far less likely to admit they have been in contact with the virus, employers cannot effectively suspend staff without pay and members should contact union legal teams where this happens.

It is recommended that unions request a policy from the employer as soon as possible, which outlines what will happen in cases of illness or isolation. Referring to other employers' best practise may help make your case.

Workers with scheduled annual leave may however find their requests cancelled. All leave is granted on the condition that the employer is able to support the absence. If the situation changes, then leave can be cancelled with appropriate notice – at least one week's notice for one week's leave – but employers can ask workers to postpone their leave if service delivery is compromised.

## **Certification of sickness absence / isolation notes**

Normally an employer will require a doctor's certificate, or 'fit note', after 7 days absence. In cases of COVID-19, symptoms are likely

## **CASE STUDIES**

*Union recognition in the workplace is making a difference. For example, Greggs, an employer which recognises the Bakers', Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU), agreed early on to pay all its workers full pay during isolation. By contrast Wetherspoons, which has thus far failed to formally recognise the BFAWU, has refused to do the same and is treating coronavirus as any other illness.*

*Certain contract workers employed by G4S, Interserve, Hermes as well as contractors ISS and Sodexo have all been guaranteed full pay in case of self-isolation thanks to the GMB union's efforts - with Hermes setting aside a £1m support fund for its 15,000 couriers.*

to last more than 7 days, and if you're in isolation, symptoms can take days still to appear. Since anyone unwell or in isolation is unable to leave home, and most patients are being asked not to attend their GP surgeries, it can be difficult to obtain a doctor's certificate if your surgery is not online.

Government lawyers have ruled that an e-mail confirmation of diagnoses will be enough for COVID-19, and workers can now access these via the NHS 111 line. This will cover anyone unwell with suspected or confirmed COVID-19, isolating due to health concerns, or in isolation for other reasons yet not displaying symptoms. This certification is being called an 'isolation note'.

Unions may also negotiate with employers that for the duration of the outbreak, certificates will not be required for periods of absence up to 14 days, or that self-certification will suffice. This has already been agreed by several employers. In addition, many employers with occupational sick pay schemes have said that sickness absence or isolation will be disregarded in respect of pay reduction triggers.

### **Workplace closure**

There is usually no legal right for employees to be paid under circumstances of workplace closure, or if an employee is required to care for a dependent. However the government's emergency measures mean employers can apply to have 80% of workers' wages reimbursed by the government.

Union reps should be calling on bosses to make up the extra 20% where this is the case, to ensure nobody is financially worse off.

### **School Closures**

Schools are now only open for the children of key workers\*, those with assigned social workers, or those with special learning needs. Parents are encouraged not to send those children in to school where possible. These part-closures have a huge impact on workers with children as well as those in the education sector. Union reps can make the case for paid parental leave for all colleagues needing time away from work to care for children.

\*[Full list of 'key workers' here.](#)

### **KNOW THE LAW**

Section 64 of the Employment Rights Act states:

(1) An employee who is suspended from work by his employer on medical grounds is entitled to be paid by his employer remuneration while he is so suspended for a period not exceeding twenty-six weeks.

...

(5) For the purposes of this Part an employee shall be regarded as suspended from work on medical grounds only if and for so long as he—

(a) continues to be employed by his employer, but

(b) is not provided with work or does not perform the work he normally performed before the suspension.

It is also expected that many schools will now remain open over the Easter holidays, in order to continue caring for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Where this means overtime for some workers, unions should be demanding extra pay and for extra time off at a later date. Unions in the education sector affected by



the Easter school opening are also calling for the postponement of redundancies, restructures, TUPE transfers and disciplinary hearings during this period.

The campaign group *Better Than Zero*, based in Scotland, produced the following guide to organising collectively in response to COVID-19, which can be applied to precarious workers anywhere:

### **WHAT IF I'M ON A ZERO HOURS CONTRACT?**

*Some workers, employed on zero hours contracts, may find they are not covered by an occupational sick pay scheme, nor Statutory Sick Pay if they find themselves unwell or must self-isolate. Employers should treat workers on these contracts like any other, and pay sick pay on the basis of a workers' average hours – or, full pay in cases of isolation.*

#### **1. Speak to as many of the people you work with as possible**

It is in everyone's interest to have sick pay agreed. It is a natural subject to talk about – start with the most sympathetic people, speak to everyone you can, and ask them to speak to others too. Any guidance your employer has given you will be calculated in their interest. It is in your interest to get a coronavirus policy sorted out. Just because your employer has already given you guidance, doesn't mean it can't be changed.

#### **2. Arrange to meet up with your colleagues**

You might not feel able to bring colleagues together to discuss the plan during work, but there is nothing to stop you meeting away from work to talk about what you would like in place. Get the contacts of colleagues (before they go off sick!) and set up a forum of communication, for example a WhatsApp group. Find a time that works for a group of you, and make sure the group has links to the people who can't make it along. Then ask people one by one if they would like to come and join.

#### **3. Draw up your request**

This will be quite simple: to be paid if and when you fall ill or have self-imposed quarantine. You can make it more detailed by doing some simple calculations about how much money you want to be paid in different circumstances. If you know how much profit your company makes, compare the rough costs of the sick pay with the profits that your bosses are making. You will probably find it won't be much of a dent.

#### **4. Work out what you'll do if the boss says no**

This is the vital bit, because without it your cure won't get past the lab stage. If your boss refuses to accept your request, then you will have to show that you have the power to win your demands. What matters most of all is signalling to your boss through your actions that you are united and determined to win. You have the same interest, so act together.

## 5. Go to your boss together and present your demand

It's time for a group of you to go and present your demand to the boss. Before you do, you should join a trade union, because it will give you security whatever you decide to do. The whole history of workplace organising suggests that chances are, the impact of your action will be enough to make your boss agree to the demand.

*For more info, visit*

*<https://www.betterthanzero.scot/> or contact  
Cailean Gallagher at [cgallagher@stuc.org.uk](mailto:cgallagher@stuc.org.uk)*

### **KNOW THE LAW**

Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 provides workers with the right to withdraw from and refuse to return to a workplace that is unsafe.

There has already been an example of one union branch walking off the job citing this law. Where reps feel their workplace is unsafe due to COVID-19 contamination, they should contact their union's legal team for urgent advice on using this.

## 3. Preparing for COVID-19: Making a plan

Trade unions should ensure their employer has in place either a separate policy for dealing with COVID-19, or a general policy covering public health emergencies, major disasters or incidents. It should not be left to employers alone to decide on what is an appropriate response - unions must also be

involved, as any effective policy must have the confidence of the whole workforce. When considering your employer's response, the following are some of the additional areas that you may wish to address. The employer must actually go through the process of considering what effect all the different possible scenarios would have on their staff and how they operate, right up to the worst likely situation of workplace closure, disruption to transport, and the disruptions to other services such as banking, the internet, supply chains etc.

Among the things unions should look at are:

- Do the employer's plans underestimate the possible absence rate as a consequence of employee infection or school closure?
- Have they looked at issues around supply of services?
- Have all departments (and the union) been involved in drawing up the plan?
- Does it treat all staff equally?
- Have they considered the operation of functions such as cleaning and catering, if these are not done 'in-house'?

### **What employers should do**

In addition to providing adequate sick pay, there are number of other measures which can be taken to help limit the spread of the virus, including:

- The provision of hand sanitisers and for employers to maintain high levels of cleanliness in the workplace.
- The cancellation of any requests for workers to travel to locations the government has warned against visiting.

- Provision of ongoing information and advice from Public Health England and other relevant bodies to all employees.

## **CASE STUDY**

*PCS has reached an agreement with Aramark and ISS on the BEIS contract that staff will receive full pay if they:*

- \* are sick with virus symptoms,*
- \* need to self isolate*
- \* have an underlying medical condition which puts them in the higher risk category,*
- \* need to take time off to care for their children due to the school closures.*

*NOTE: This is not something the contractors volunteered (in fact, ISS has refused to engage with the union). Rather, it is something BEIS agreed to provide extra funding to cover, following pressure from union reps.*

## **Workplace hygiene**

Many employers will plan to step up their cleaning regimes in the event of an outbreak. However, they should bear in mind that it is likely that the number of cleaning staff may be reduced as a result of illness. Damp rather than dry dusting should be carried out during a pandemic to avoid the generation of dust and it is recommended that the cleaning of surfaces be carried out using a freshly prepared solution of detergent and hot water

followed, where necessary, by a chlorine based disinfectant solution.

There may be proposals to switch off air conditioning systems in large open plan offices or workshops as a way of preventing the virus spreading. Be careful with this. Air conditioning can dilute contaminated air and provide a more comfortable environment, and generally the air being recirculated is the same that would ordinarily be in the room.

Where someone in a workplace tests positive for COVID-19, employers should be expected to carry out a deep clean by specialist cleaning teams. Bear in mind, however, that the virus is only estimated to be able to survive outside of a human or animal for a few hours maximum.

## **Personal hygiene**

Employers should work to protect their staff by safeguarding workplaces to the best of their ability. This can include the provision of hand sanitisers and other cleaning equipment, and for employers to maintain high levels of cleanliness in the workplace. Generally, providing facilities for workers to wash their hands is the most basic and most effective provision an employer can take. This is one area which employers can start taking action on straight away. One of the ways in which any virus is likely to spread quickly is through hand to face contact, coughing and sneezing. Employers and union activists can download material from the Department of Health in order to educate people on the importance of hand-washing and the use of handkerchiefs now. Ensure the information provided is correct - bad practise has been reported of employers giving workers harmful advice about using detergents to clean their hands.

Soap and water is enough – and providing hand sanitizer gel can supplement this. Many people will simply think that the best way of preventing the spread of the virus is to stay at home while showing symptoms. While this is true, many people can be infectious without showing symptoms. This is why unions should support general hygiene campaigns, as a way of slowing the spread of any pandemic should it develop.

## **Personal Protective Equipment**

In some workplaces, workers are being provided with additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as precautionary measures – for example, postal workers at Royal Mail can request gloves, and NHS workers are being provided with masks. Not all PPE is necessarily required for other sections of the workforce, however guidance will be updated, especially according to reallocation and redeployment, especially for key worker industries.

There is no evidence that, outside health care situations, the general use of **facemasks** has any actual effect on protecting people or reducing the speed of a pandemic's development.

In fact, the surgical paper masks most commonly seen offer little in the way of protection. They can reduce viral droplets being expelled by the wearer if they already have the virus, but they will not go a long way in preventing exposure. In a worst case scenario, these types of masks may even increase virus replication, as the breathe causes masks to become damp and humid.

The most effective mask for those dealing directly with COVID-19 patients is the asbestos respirator level 3 (FFP3), and tests have shown it reduces the level of exposure by six-fold. There is specific guidance from the HSE which unions can consult on face

fitting for masks:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/respiratory-protective-equipment/fit-testing-basics.htm>

As media attention to the risk of outbreak increases, employers will become susceptible to approaches from unscrupulous companies who will attempt to sell them protective equipment, much of which may have no practical effect or may even prove counterproductive.

There have been reports of workers being issued with out of date masks, so union reps should check these upon issue, and look out for a certification mark, as this indicates it has met relevant EU health and safety standards. It is also vital that masks are issued to workers for personal use, and not shared.

**Gloves** do not prevent infection as people will still touch their skin with the gloves and then touch another surface or person. Latex gloves carry significant risks of producing an allergic reaction and were they to be used during an outbreak there would be problems of disposal.

The use of **hand sanitising liquid** is slightly different. It may be that some public organisations will make it available at key entry areas or where there is likely to be *via* contact between people. Public transport systems may use some form of sanitising spray in the event of an outbreak. However, care should be taken to ensure that any products used are fully safe to use and are not likely to exceed their sell-by date within the next few years if they are bulk-buying future supplies.

If workers are engaging with people who have tested positive for COVID-19 – for example health care providers – then

specific personal protective equipment is required. The government's guidance states:

- Use of long-sleeved disposable fluid-repellent gown
- Disposable gloves with long tight-fitting cuffs for contact with the patient or their environment
- Eye protection to be worn for all patient contacts
- Refrain from touching mouth, eyes or nose with potentially contaminated gloves

## **BIN IT**

Germs can live for several hours on tissues. Dispose of your tissue as soon as possible.



## **KILL IT**

Hands can transfer germs to every surface you touch. Clean your hands as soon as you can.



## **UNIONISE**

Paid sick leave stops disease from spreading in your workplace. Join your union today.



*instagram/uniteinhospitality*

### **CASE STUDY**

*When the first case of a member of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) was reported at a Royal Mail sorting office, the union agreed with the employer that a professional, medically qualified clinician would brief the workforce to provide assurances and answer any questions.*

### **Providing information, advice and guidance**

There is an duty on employers to keep workers informed with up-to-date, reliable information from sources like the Department for Health and Public Health England. There are various sources of misinformation circling, which can cause undue stress, or even lead to workers taking measures which may end up causing more harm, not less.

Management should also ensure that relevant contact numbers are up to date and readily available, and that they have received any necessary training on understanding COVID-19 and the measures needed should an outbreak be suspected.

Union safety reps should be consulted with and made aware of any policies or measures taken, and clear lines of reporting to managers should be established.

Safety representatives are urged to ensure that their employer notifies all their staff of what arrangements they have made to prepare for an outbreak of pandemic COVID-19, including what role they expect individual staff to take. Staff should be given information and the need for personal hygiene. This should be done in a non-patronising way and with the full involvement of stewards or safety representatives.

### **Summary demands on employers in light of social distancing:**

- Support working from home wherever possible.
- Furloughing all non-essential staff, making use of the government's Job Retention Scheme, topping up pay and issuing advance payments.

- Consult the union. Union health and safety reps and committees have a right to be consulted by law on any changes to working practices.
- Conduct risk assessments on coronavirus, accounting for risk of contamination and likelihood of staffing absences.
- Take immediate measures to implement social distancing: stagger shift starting times and break times, reducing staffing numbers and consider split shifts.
- Cease the use of bio-metric clocking in systems and remove any requirement for workers to touch surfaces where it is not necessary to the job.
- Ensure there is no detriment to any worker who is absent as a result of coronavirus, or has genuine concerns about risks: no worker should be penalised for refusing to work in unsafe conditions.
- Provide workers with access to washing facilities (as already required by law), introduce strict cleaning regimes and provide appropriate personal protective equipment.
- Ensure workers have access to free parking on-site or nearby, so as many as possible can avoid public transport.
- Provide changing facilities to allow workers the option to change clothes before going home.
- Ensure the workforce is provided with up-to-date information on new guidance and legislation.

## **4. Getting organised: 10 things trade union members can do NOW to organise on coronavirus at work.**

### **1. Unionise.**

If you haven't already, join. If you're already in, organise. If that means in isolation, so be it – invite colleagues to a video call or WhatsApp group. Regardless of how big your union is, or whether it's recognised or not, you should be having union meetings about coronavirus. Whether it's redundancy, pay or PPE, every single worker has something to negotiate right now.

### **2. Audit your contract.**

Check your contracts and staff handbooks for relevant clauses to clarify your rights and responsibilities. You may have questions around working from home, the sickness management policy, maternity rights and other entitlements, so carry out an audit of yours and your colleagues contracts to see where you stand. Make sure you're including any agency workers in that who may have very different terms and conditions. If you think your employer is breaching your contract, or if they are asking you to go in when it is against government or medical advice, contact your union's legal teams now.

### **3. Demand to be consulted.**

If your bosses are drawing up policies around the response to coronavirus, make sure they're speaking to the union. Employers have a legal duty to consult established health and safety

reps and committee, and reps have the right to play an active role in risk assessments.

#### **4. Fight for 100%.**

Across the country, 'furloughed' workers on the government's Jobs Retention Scheme are going to be faced with the possibility of a 20% cut in pay unless their employer agrees to top up the government's wage subsidy. Other workers affected by school closures are faced with unpaid parental leave as they take time to care for their kids. This is a huge battle and unions are playing a major role in negotiating in workplaces. If you've got questions or concerns about the scheme, register for our Webinar on Wednesday 1st April at 2pm (or watch it back) here:

<https://www.crowdcast.io/tuc>

#### **5. Shame bad bosses.**

Employers cutting pay, laying people off, or opening their workplace without the necessary distancing or hygiene measures need to be called out. For especially hostile bosses, public pressure from the outside can support union organising on the inside. Campaigns like #BoycottWetherspoons ran by BFAWU members or #ShutTheSites by Unite activists can threaten the reputational damage of businesses and force a U-turn.

#### **6. Demand Safety.**

Bosses need to take seriously the calls for distancing, cleanliness and hygiene. The [law is clear](#) on the welfare provisions you should have access to. We need sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing to front-line workers – especially health and social care. More people will die if this

call is not met. We need the government to urgently issue scientific advice on PPE to all key workers, direct enforcement agencies to take appropriate action – and to ensure those who flout to law are penalised.

If you are working from home, you still need to think about safe working conditions. Repetitive strain injury is a serious workplace hazard, and unions should demand no worker is out of pocket from purchasing equipment to support their posture etc.

#### **7. Support retired members.**

Many trade union members already been involved in setting up and supporting mutual aid groups which demonstrate the strength and solidarity of our movement. Many unions have retired members branches, whose members may not be as plugged in to online channels but may well fall into the more vulnerable category. Reach out to branches and ask what kind of work your union members can be doing to bring support to them.

#### **8. Keep in touch.**

It's important to maintain lines of communication both with management and with each other. At a time when many of us are working in isolation, it's easier for bosses to play divide and rule. Guard against it and keep in touch regularly, reporting any new developments. For your own mental health, too, maintaining a network of colleagues who you can check in with will help bring some familiarity to your day.

#### **9. Take action.**

We may not be able to hold protests

and rallies at the moment, but workers can still take action. Friday 20th March saw one union branch walk off the job over safety concerns as bosses refused to close the non-essential workplace. In Ireland nearly 1,000 union members walked off a food production site protesting the lack of safety measures. But remember – don't take action without support: whether it be an open letter, petition or downing of tools, your union will be able to advise you legally on the best way to take, and to escalate, action and ensure you're protected.

## 10. Remember them.

As the coronavirus crisis carries on, people are dying. Every day. Many of those around the world losing their lives to this virus are the workers on the front-line in health, education, transport, retail and other sectors. Next month is International Workers' Memorial Day - marked every year on April 28th. Put the date in your diary and to be involved in the TUC's online memorial. While we mourn those who have passed, we mobilise to ensure not another life is lost to work. #IWMD20

## Further information

In addition to supporting unions to organise for better terms and conditions in the context of COVID-19, the TUC is also calling on the government to make urgent legislative changes

You can read our detailed briefing on the changes needed to Statutory Sick Pay here: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/sick-pay-all> and our request for an emergency government task-force here:

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-calls-emergency-coronavirus-taskforce-unions-and-business>

Other sources for information:

NHS advice on Coronavirus (COVID-19): [England](#) | [Wales](#)

World Health Organisation, Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19:

<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>

Health and Safety Executive, Coronavirus (COVID-19), latest information and advice: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/news/coronavirus.htm>

Hazards Magazine

<http://www.hazards.org/infections/coronavirus/>

**Below you find a list of dedicated coronavirus information from our affiliated trade unions.**

Accord <https://accord-myunion.org/covid-19-coronavirus/>

Advance <https://www.advance-union.org/Corona>

AEP <https://www.aep.org.uk/coronavirus-acas-guidance-for-all-employers-employees/>

AFA-

CWA <https://www.afacwa.org/coronavirus>

ASLEF [https://www.aslef.org.uk/article.php?group\\_id=7029](https://www.aslef.org.uk/article.php?group_id=7029)

BDA <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/covid-19-corona-virus-advice-for-the-general-public.html>



BECTU Sector of Prospect <https://bectu.org.uk/topic/covid-19-coronavirus/>

BFAWU [https://www.bfawu.org/coronavirus\\_update\\_for\\_fast\\_food\\_and\\_hospitality\\_workers](https://www.bfawu.org/coronavirus_update_for_fast_food_and_hospitality_workers)

BOS-TU <https://www.orthoptics.org.uk/coronavirus/>

College of Podiatry <https://cop.org.uk/news/coronaviruses/>

Community <https://community-tu.org/advice-centre/coronavirus/>

CSP <https://www.csp.org.uk/news/coronaviruses>

EIS <https://www.eis.org.uk/Health-And-Safety/COVID19>

Equity <https://www.equity.org.uk/about/coronavirus-advice/>

FBU <https://www.fbu.org.uk/covid-19>

FDA <https://www.fda.org.uk/home/Newsandmedia/Features/Coronavirus-Information-on-school-provision-for-children-of-key-workers.aspx>

GMB <https://www.gmb.org.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-what-members-need-know>

HCSA <https://www.hcsa.com/covid-19.aspx>

MU <https://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/coronavirus>

NAHT <https://www.naht.org.uk/advice-and-support/management/coronavirus-guidance-for-school-leaders/>

NASUWT <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/health-safety/coronavirus-guidance.html>

National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) <https://www.nsead.org/trade-union/member-updates/coronavirus/>

Nautilus International <https://www.nautilusint.org/en/news-insight/telegraph/nautilus-fags-on-covid19-coronavirus/>

NEU <https://neu.org.uk/coronavirus>

NGSU <https://ngsu.org.uk/blog/category/covid-19/>

NUJ <https://www.nuj.org.uk/work/covid-19-information/>

PFA <https://www.thepfa.com/news/2020/3/16/covid-19-pfa-update>

Prospect <https://prospect.org.uk/topic/covid-19-coronavirus/>

RCM <https://www.rcm.org.uk/news-views/news/2020/february/coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know/>

SoR <https://www.sor.org/practice/covid-19/coronavirus-information-and-resources>

TSSA <https://www.tssa.org.uk/en/help-legal-advice/coronavirus/index.cfm>

UCU <https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus>

UNISON <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>

Unite <https://unitetheunion.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/>

URTU <http://www.urtu.com/uploads/COVID-19%20Guide%20for%20Reps%20%281%29.pdf>

USDAW <http://www.usdaw.org.uk/Help-Advice/Coronavirus-Update>

WGGB <https://writersguild.org.uk/covid-19-advice-for-members/>

## **Find out more**

For more information about TUC Health and Safety, go to:

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/health-safety-and-well-being>

Follow the campaign on Facebook at:

<https://www.facebook.com/TUChealthandsafety>

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