

UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 - Rule 9 questionnaire response of United Voice of the World (UVW) Reference: M2/R9R/UVW/TJS

- 1. A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body. Please explain whether the work of the organisation or body is UK wide, or is instead confined to England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland only.**

United Voices of the World is a member-led, direct action, anti-racist, campaigning trade union and we exist to support and empower the most vulnerable groups of precarious, low-paid and predominantly BAME and migrant workers in the UK. We work with members across the entire UK.

UVW is an unincorporated association with quasi corporate status by reason of its being a trade union under s.10 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations Consolidation Act 1992.

We fight the bosses through direct action on the streets and through the courts and demand that all members receive at least the London Living Wage, full pay sick pay, dignity, equality and respect. We will always challenge outsourcing, a practice that creates a two-tiered, racially segregated workforce, pits workers against each other, slashes wages, strips workers of their basic rights and breaks unions.

- 2. A brief description of the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents.**

The union brings together workers from many sectors including cleaning, security, catering and portering from the typically outsourced facilities/services sector and also hospitality, retail, construction, health care workers and other professions including sex workers, artists, architects, childcare workers, social workers, charity sector workers and legal sector workers including paralegals, solicitors, and barristers.

- 3. A brief overview of the work of the organisation or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s) between January 2020 and Spring 2022 as it relates to the response to Covid-19 of (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive.**

Advocacy and representation

United Voices of the World (UVW) was active in supporting our members in response to Covid-19 from the outset of the pandemic. We observed a significant increase in requests for support from our members in the first half of 2020 with the majority concerning Covid-19 response measures. In March 2020, we launched a campaign for an increase in Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) which was at the time £94.25 per day and significantly below the cost of living. Our members could not afford to stay home and/or self-isolate with only SSP to cover their living costs, and were forced to work in dangerous conditions and risk the wider public health by the spreading the virus as a result.

Following the death of one of our members, Emmanuel Gomes, of suspected Covid-19 on 24 April 2020 whilst working as an outsourced cleaner at the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), we strengthened our campaign for increased sick pay for MOJ cleaners.¹² Emmanuel was forced

¹ [Justice for Emanuel – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/justice-for-emmanuel)

² [Emanuel Gomes died just hours after his cleaning shift. Why was he working? | Coronavirus | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/24/emmanuel-gomes-died-just-hours-after-his-cleaning-shift-why-was-he-working-coronavirus)

to work through his illness as he could not afford to live on SSP alone, and was working a shift just hours before his death. The lack of sick pay prevented Emmanuel from properly resting and self-isolating, increasing his risk of serious illness and was forced to risk wider public health by exposing others to the virus. As a result of the campaign, UVW members secured full pay for sick leave for MOJ cleaners. MOJ released new funds for this purpose and agreed to pay backdated pay to outsourced cleaners who had already isolated from 1 April 2020.

There was also a chronic lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), including face masks, for cleaners at MOJ. Despite numerous complaints, the issue was not resolved and UVW explored the possibility of judicial review as a result. Ultimately, UVW decided not to proceed with legal action. However, as problems persisted into 2022, UVW organised a protest at Downing Street on 26 May 2022 to demand an end to the culture of disrespect towards our members, particularly cleaners and security guards, working in government buildings and offices across London.³

Our members across several sectors were experiencing substandard treatment in the context of Covid-19. As such, on 3 September 2020, our sector branches released their demands to employers.⁴ These demands highlighted the common themes of lack of sick pay, precarity of casualised workers, lack of PPE and a resistance on the part of employers to allow workers to work from home. They also highlight the diversity of the sector derived from the variety of work carried out by our members and calls attention to the importance of tailored advice regarding Covid-19 safety precautions in different sectors. For example, safety measures and PPE for a cleaner and likely have some differences to those for an architect, and this tailored advice remains lacking from government.

In response to the chronic lack of PPE in our members' workplaces, we sourced 2000 face masks from Hong Kong through a transnational mutual aid network which we distributed for free to our members working in frontline key-worker roles.⁵

To address the inaction on these complaints and demands, members of our architecture workers branch walked out from their workplace on 8 January 2021, exercising their section 44 Employment Rights Act 1996 rights, with support from the sector union. On 14 January 2021, our legal sector workers branch also wrote directly to His Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) and MOJ in response to the policy decision to keep criminal courts open and made seven recommendations to improve the situation.⁶

Mutual aid and support for members

In addition to advocacy and representation of our members in workplaces and to the government, UVW also undertook considerable efforts to support our members to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, often filling the gaps that should have been handled by employers and/or the government. On 14 April 2020, we hosted an online session entitled "Knowing your rights in times of Covid-19" as part of our outreach initiative. The training supported our members to be familiar with their employment rights and the duties of employers to protect employees safety and wellbeing.

We noticed the detrimental impact of the pandemic on the mental health of our members, particularly given the precarity many of them face in the form of low wages, precarious employment contracts, housing insecurity, immigration barriers and day-to-day discrimination.

³ [Cleaners and security guards union to demonstrate against government's culture of disrespect against low-paid workers – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](#)

⁴ [Sector demands – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](#)

⁵ [UVW to distribute 2,000 surgical masks to key and frontline workers – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Open Letter to HMCTS and the Ministry of Justice – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](#)

On 18 April 2020, we conducted an online workshop entitled “Member to member support during Covid-19” led by BACP counsellors and UVW members to help facilitate peer-to-peer mutual aid and support. The workshop included breakout sessions in Spanish and English.

There was a serious lack of translated Covid-19 guidance throughout the relevant period. As such, UVW translated government guidance as it was released and as changes were made to rules and advice. We dedicated a section of our website to Covid-19 related guidance, rules and advice including information about what to do when facing dismissal or redundancy, furlough schemes and extensions, testing, pandemic restrictions and tier systems, and others.⁷ This information was provided in English and Spanish.

We also regularly signposted members to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) support services that were inundated with referrals following the dramatic increase in domestic abuse during the relevant period. Services for Spanish speaking survivors were particularly stretched. We sent out graphics and short videos in English and Spanish and these publications were used by other migrant solidarity organisations such as Latin American Women’s Rights Service (LAWRS).

- 4. A list of any articles or reports the organisation or body has published or contributed to, and/or evidence it has given (for example to Parliamentary Select Committees) regarding the impact on the group(s) which the organisation or body supports or represents of the response to Covid-19 by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive.**

20 April 2020 - [UVW members step in to offer well-being support during #COVID19 – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

29 April 2020 - [Two workers at the Ministry of Justice die from suspected COVID-19 – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

7 May 2020 - [UVW to distribute 2,000 surgical masks to key and frontline workers – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

26 May 2020 - [Cleaners and security guards union to demonstrate against government’s culture of disrespect against low-paid workers – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

8 July 2020 - [Emanuel’s story begins to be heard – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

8 July 2020 - [Stunning victory for UVW as Ministry of Justice is pressured into granting cleaners full pay sick pay – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

14 July 2020 - [Ministry of Justice to face Judicial Review over lack of face masks links to death of outsourced cleaner – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

28 October 2020 - [Organising through Covid-19: An update from LSWU – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

11 January 2021 - [“Our courts are not Covid-secure” says Legal Sector Workers United as it calls for immediate halt to possession proceedings – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

14 January 2021 - [Open letter to HMCTS and the Ministry of Justice - UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

⁷ UVW, “Know Your Rights – Covid-19”, [Covid-19 – UVW \(uvwunion.org.uk\)](https://uvwunion.org.uk)

- 5. The view of the organisation or body as to whether the group(s) it supports or represents was adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive. Please also explain the reasons for the view expressed by the organisation or body in this respect.**

It is our view that our members and the groups of which they form part were not adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by the UK government. UVW's membership is predominantly made up of frontline low-wage migrant workers in service sector jobs. The majority of these jobs cannot be performed remotely, and as such, these workers were at the greatest risk of negative health and financial consequences of Covid-19.

Lack of consideration of access to sick pay

One of the biggest factors to impact our members was the lack of adequate sick pay. The majority of our members, whether those with employee status or those categorized as self-employed, did not have access to full pay sick leave. As a result, these workers often cannot afford to take sick leave because the lack of sick pay in combination with their overall low wages creates too great a financial burden if a day's wages is lost. For those who have access to SSP, the government's decision to extend eligibility from the first day of illness did not go far enough as the rate of SSP was still too low to cover basic living costs. For our members that are categorised as self-employed or "limb b" workers, such as "gig economy" workers, they were not eligible for SSP at all. In both cases, where there was no reasonable option to taking sick leave, our members had to continue working through their illness in order to survive financially rather than self-isolate, at great risk to themselves and the wider public health.

Where illness was a result of Covid-19, their inability to self-isolate both increased their risk of serious illness and created the risk that they would become "super-spreaders" of the virus as a result of their frontline roles and the numerous public spaces with which they interact through their work. Where their illness was a result of non-Covid conditions and diseases, continuing to work further increased their risk of contracting Covid-19 by potentially exposing them to the virus at a time of reduced immunity. The threat posed by the inability of many workers to self-isolate posed such a risk to vulnerable groups and to the wider public health that it is self-evident from the subsequent lack of action that these workers were not adequately considered. It is our view that the government ought to have made it compulsory for employers to adopt an occupational sick pay scheme that would have created a realistic route for all workers to self-isolate.

Lack of consideration of the impact of outsourcing

The common practice of outsourcing frontline service roles has led to a two tier system of rights within many workplaces. Our members who are outsourced workers often had absent or substandard PPE in comparison to in-house employees, lower pay, a lack of holiday and sick pay as described above. The precarity of these conditions increases the vulnerability of these workers to the health and financial consequences of Covid-19. It is the view of UVW that the government did not consider the impact of outsourcing on migrant workers with precarious low-wage contracts and the subsequent risk to their wellbeing or the wider public health in the face of a pandemic. This two-tier system has been perpetuated by the

government's lack of action in enacting policy that would compel employers to provide equal working terms and conditions for all workers. Furthermore, the government itself has been one of the key employers that have chosen to outsource service level roles in its own buildings, and endorse these substantially inferior working terms and conditions. This has entrenched pre-existing inequalities that face our members as well as threatened the wider public health.

Lack of consideration of the disproportionate impact of lacking PPE on precarious workers

The overall lack of suitable PPE available in the UK throughout the relevant period, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic has been well documented. This lack had a particular impact on those working in frontline service roles, which are performed in the majority by low-wage migrant workers. Many of our members were regularly expected to work with either completely absent or substandard PPE during the relevant period. The lack of adequate planning and effective decision-making on the part of government in matters concerning PPE had a disproportionate impact on these workers and betrays the lack of consideration that government had for them. These conditions were worsened by the lack of enforcement action that the government took regarding the actions of employers regarding Covid-19 working conditions, social distancing guidance and PPE. Our members report widespread disregard of this guidance but there was little effort on the part of government, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or any other relevant body to ensure these rules were followed. As a result of this failure to adequately consider enforcement of Covid-19 guidance in workplaces, frontline workers were left exposed to dangerous conditions whilst those with precarious contracts had little recourse to challenge their employers without fear of reprimand or dismissal. Despite this threat, some of our members did take the courageous step to challenge their employers and were met with considerable resistance.

Lack of consideration of the needs and barriers faced by migrant communities

As discussed above, the lack of Covid-19 information and guidance available in many languages spoken in the UK demonstrates the government's lack of consideration of migrant communities. Where translated guidance was available from the government, it typically lagged behind the English guidance by several days.

From the outset of the pandemic, organisations across the migrant support sector appealed to the government to suspend hostile environment policies and 'no recourse to public funds' conditions. These policies increased the vulnerability of migrant communities by creating barriers to housing, healthcare, and welfare benefits and exposed them to greater risk of detriment caused by the pandemic. For those with NRPf status, the impact of these barriers was particularly severe. People with NRPf status are disproportionately represented in precarious service roles and these barriers significantly increased the risk of destitution alongside the lack of fair pay and protections received from their employers.

To summarise, it is the view of UVW that the government failed to consider our membership who are predominantly made up of precarious migrant workers. Our members fulfilled crucial frontline service roles during the relevant period, many of them fundamental to controlling the spread of the virus. However, the decision-making of the government suggests that our membership was considered expendable. By failing to consider equal access to sick pay, suitable PPE, the impact of outsourcing and the needs and barriers faced by migrant communities, the government created the conditions in which our membership would suffer a disproportionate detriment to their health and financial circumstances. The impact on our membership is reason enough that the government ought to have acted with greater care in their decision making. In addition to this, the government's failure to consider our membership risked the wider public health by creating conditions in which our members had no reasonable way to self-isolate and were instead forced to continue working and without suitable PPE at that.

- 6. Whether the organisation or body raised any concerns about the consideration being given to the group(s) which it supports or represents with (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive, when the Government(s) and/or Executive were making decisions about their response to Covid-19. Please provide a list of any such correspondence or meetings with the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or the Northern Ireland Executive, including the dates on which the body or organisation wrote or such meetings were held, to whom the correspondence was addressed or with whom the meeting was held, and any response received from the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and/or Northern Ireland Executive addressing such concerns.**

14 January 2021 – Open letter from legal sector workers branch of UVW to HMCTS and MOJ, <https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/en/news/2021/01/open-letter-to-hmcts-and-the-ministry-of-justice/>

Undated – Open letter from architectural workers branch of UVW to Parliament

- 7. A brief summary of the views of the organisation or body as to any lessons, if any, that can be learned from any consideration which was given to the group(s) that the organisation or body supports or represents by (a) the UK Government; (b) the Scottish Government; (c) the Welsh Government; and/or (d) the Northern Ireland Executive when they were making decisions about their response to Covid-19.**

UVW makes the following observations and recommendations regarding lessons that can be learned from the consideration given to our membership:

- a) End the two-tier outsourcing used predominantly by public sector organisations and ensure that all workers in a workplaces are accorded the same protections;
- b) Ensure that employment law and policy provides equal protections for health and safety, access to sick pay, and protections from dismissal for all workers, including 'limb b' workers and those categorised as self-employed;
- c) Ensure that all workers, including 'limb b' workers and those categorised as self-employed, are paid a living wage (whether the National Living Wage or London Living Wage);
- d) Review SSP and move to an occupational sick pay (OSP) model which guarantees full pay from the first day of absence due to illness or injury;
- e) During national emergencies such as pandemic, ensure that all workers, particularly those with low wages and precarious contracts, have access to an emergency payment at least at the rate of the National Living Wage or London Living Wage;
- f) Ensure that all government guidance is available in a wide range of languages and accessible formats;

- g) Integrate intersectional analysis into government decision-making and equality impact assessments to ensure that the multiple vulnerabilities and forms of discrimination faces by precarious migrant workers in typically low-wage sectors are addressed;
- h) Address the socio-economic and health inequalities face by migrant, refugee, Black and minority ethnic communities, women, and queer communities to increase equity and to reduce the disproportionate impact of emergency situations on these communities
- i) Creating measurable bottom-up governance tools and frameworks to include marginalised voices to meaningfully participate in policymaking, from consultation to implementation