

Coronavirus: Key Trade Union Issues

27th March

The points below represent key issues raised by a wide range of unions over the last 3 days

Economic Response Measures	Some employers are opportunistically self-identifying as essential services and requiring staff to come in. Most notable in construction and retail sectors.
	Welsh Government needs to be advocating for clearer rules from UK Government and protections for non-key workers who choose to not go into work.
	Welsh Government also has a key role in communicating guidance and should be more aggressively using its public platform to tackle employers who are seeking to exploit the situation.
	Lack of clarity on the pay retention scheme has created significant challenges with employers – e.g. no pay until scheme kicks in in April, redundancies continuing despite the guarantees in the scheme.
	There needs to be clear guidance issued on how employers communicate the situation they are putting their employees in – e.g. are they being laid off or made redundant. Lots of cases where employers simply don't seem to understand the options and the support that they're being offered.
	New support scheme for the self-employed welcome but has significant gaps – e.g. no access until June. What measures is Welsh Government considering help address these gaps?
	<p>TUC position on necessary next steps has been set out here: https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/fixing-safety-net-what-next-supporting-working-peoples-incomes</p> <p>This focuses on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring that the existing job retention scheme covers as many people as possible• Introducing a comprehensive support system for the self-employed• Fixing sick pay• Supporting parents• Fully funded council tax freeze• Strengthening local hardship funds• Support for renters <p>Would be helpful for the Welsh Government to publicly update its view on gaps and priorities in relation to UK policy – following up the letter that the First Ministers sent to the Chancellor on March 17th (https://twitter.com/fmwales/status/1239920266899271683?s=20)</p>

	Also needs to be an urgent discussion on where Welsh Government has the capacity to plug gaps in support.
Health	Unions have welcomed the WG statement this week on PPE and are encouraged by the emergence of a coherent plan but stark gap between statement and current reality. Genuine fear among staff about their exposure and the risks that they present to their families.
	Again, welcome the recent statements on ramping up testing but current lack of provision continues to have big impact on workforce numbers and huge source of frustration and anxiety for workers.
	The advice on pregnant workers needs to be strengthened. The FAQs are not clear or prescriptive enough and as a result there is a high level of inconsistency between employers.
	Recruitment drive is positive but burnout still
PPE (Private Sector)	Big supply challenges. Key decisions are being made arbitrarily in workplaces. There should be a programme of requisitioning supply from closed sectors. Development of sector-specific PPE guidance would be helpful. Workers need to be able to enforce their right to socially distance. Need for clarity on the status of cleaning staff – more important than ever but not currently considered key workers.
Social Care	PPE continues to be a problem with some staff being forced to provide their own. Impossible to practice proper social distancing.
	Staff in some residential settings have been told that if they're exposed to the virus at work they'll have to self-isolate within the home and essentially work there during the 14 days
	Concerns that staff in residential settings will have to be in lockdown in the homes if this becomes stricter
	Staff are still coming in when they should be self-isolating because they can't afford to go onto SSP.
Retail	Huge surge in recruitment. As a result, new staff are being put in stressful situations with very limited training.
	Need for clear, prescriptive instructions on the use of PPE rather than current broad guidelines. Must be enforced. Some companies are preventing staff wear masks on the grounds that its putting customers off.
	Messages around how to behave in shops needs to be pushed as widely as possible to protect staff. Welsh Government has a role here.
Education	Supply teachers: Unacceptable decisions of schools who had supply teachers on long term contracts cancelling those contracts. These should be honoured by the schools and agencies. Clarity needed on access for supply teachers to the UK Government's job retention scheme. Are agencies accessing government business support schemes and what, if any, benefit will this have for supply teachers?
	Some LAs indicating that they will be proceeding with redundancy processes.
	Lack of PPE, lack of clear guidance on PPE, extremely challenging to adhere to social distancing
	Pay: Guidance in some counties states that pay will not be made under conditions that include, 'Staff will not be paid if you are afraid about contamination without any grounds for risk of infection'. No consideration for mental health and difficulty in knowing the risks without testing arrangements.
	Key Workers: some counties require two parents to be critical workers and others only one parent. The Welsh Government guidance is: 'If one parent is a critical worker but the other is not, then the non-critical parent should provide alternative safe arrangements at home where possible'. Also, two models have appeared: where an authority operates a HWB or all schools are open. Consideration needs to be made as to the effectiveness of the arrangements as HWB requires pupils to travel some distance in some cases.
Housing	Renters protection needs to be strengthened for the duration of the crisis. Total ban on evictions. Welsh Government should use powers available to extend current 3 month ban to six months (as has happened in Scotland). Freezes to mortgage payments for landlords should be passed on to renters. Should not be left to individuals to negotiate with landlords.

Fire and Rescue Services	Fire service absences rate is lower than initially feared at this point.
	Fire and Rescue personnel should be included in any testing regime and included in any planning discussions.
	Concerns around appropriate masks/visors/eye-pro for those fire stations that provide a specific bariatric patient response and the possibility of dealing with someone suffering the effects of Coronavirus.
Creative Industries	<p>WG could also directly help by providing the Arts Council of Wales, Creative Wales, and other relevant bodies such as Local Authorities with additional, ring-fenced funding to support self-employed and freelance workers in the arts and creative industries directly and/or through the companies they have been working for.</p> <p>Arts Council England have now announced £160m of emergency funding for organisations and individuals: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/covid19</p> <p>This highlights the need for Welsh Government and the Arts Council of Wales to work together on an equivalent package of additional support.</p>