

Witness Name: M3/W1

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits:

Dated: 13 August 2024

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF M3/W1**

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I, M3/W1 will say as follows: -

1. I am a member of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB) and I worked as a hospital cleaner throughout the pandemic and to date. I am originally from Colombia and I am a Spanish national by descent. I moved to the UK in 2012. I now hold settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme. I began working as a cleaner in two different hospitals when I moved to London. I live in London and I share a flat with eight other people. I have no family in London and during the pandemic my father passed away, which was extremely painful and I am still grieving. My mother depends on me financially and I regularly send money to her from my wages.
2. I was working at a private hospital in London during the pandemic, but I was employed by an outsourced company. I began working for the outsourced company in around I&S when one of my colleagues told me about the IWGB. I decided to join because I don't speak English and I don't know the legal system in this country. I still work in this same hospital as a cleaner today. I no longer work for the outsourced company because me and my colleagues have been employed in-house since I&S following an IWGB campaign. The majority of my colleagues are also migrant workers.

### *Changes to my working conditions*

3. Before the pandemic, I was only tasked with cleaning the **I&S** department but once the pandemic started, my employer would ask me to clean several different areas of the hospital. I previously worked three hours Monday to Friday during the evening before the pandemic, but this was increased to eight hours total a day including night shifts after the pandemic started. The hospital was short-staffed, partly because of many cleaners feeling too scared to work and others regularly falling ill. **However, I didn't have the option to take time off work even though I was scared because I needed money to pay my rent and to support my family in Colombia. I also didn't really want to work additional hours but I felt pressured by the circumstances and didn't feel able to say no to them** because of fears of losing my job or being reprimanded. I was worried I might not be able to find other work as so many businesses were closing down and reducing hours as a result of the pandemic.

### *Information, training and updates on IPC guidance*

4. I was constantly anxious of catching Covid whilst working. I was not told by my employers or the hospital management whether there were wards where people were being treated for Covid in the hospital, but I heard rumours from colleagues that there were. **I felt seriously concerned that this information wasn't formally provided to workers so I couldn't be sure of the risk I was exposed to in different areas of the hospital.** When I saw people cleaning lifts I was scared there had been Covid patients in them, so I started taking the stairs. The hospital took private and NHS patients.
5. **I didn't clean rooms whilst patients were present in them, and mostly cleaned rooms that were empty.** This was often after the previous occupant of the room had been relocated, or because they had died. My supervisors did not inform me what the condition of the patients **had been, so I didn't know what kind of contaminants I was cleaning.** In particular, **I didn't know whether the patient had Covid-19.**

6. I received no training whatsoever about how to clean in accordance with Covid-19 specific guidelines, and I was never given any update on infection prevention and control (IPC) guidelines either by my employer or by the hospital staff. I am not aware of any training being provided to others in Spanish or English as I work solitarily and only communicated with the Spanish speaking supervisor. We were only told to clean in the normal business as usual way we would have done before the pandemic and there was no apparent consideration given to the risk of cross-contamination between different areas of the hospital. This was very concerning to me considering the seriousness of the pandemic. I cleaned as thoroughly as I could, but I **don't know whether** this was compliant with infection prevention and control **guidance at the time because I wasn't** made aware of it.
7. I was also given no guidance at all on how to properly protect myself, and I was scared nearly all the time whilst working as a result. The only resources of information I received came from outside of work. Despite my concerns, I **didn't** raise a complaint with my employers or with hospital management because I was scared there would be negative consequences and I could not afford to lose my job. My colleagues and I also suffered severe bullying and harassment from our supervisor. We complained to the outsourced company many times about our supervisor, but they would not deal with our grievances. This environment made it feel impossible to refuse work, raise concerns or demand more protections. I felt that I would either be reprimanded or the complaint would be ignored. I was also **so exhausted from working that I didn't feel I had the mental energy to complain.**
8. Things became so bad that my union, IWGB, raised the issues of health and safety and bullying with the hospital and sent a pre-action letter on our behalf. In response, the outsourced company denied all allegations of inadequate IPC guidance and training.

*Contractual protections and sick pay*

9. There was a distinct difference in the treatment of outsourced workers and in-house workers. Firstly, we were paid significantly less, and were paid below the London Living Wage throughout the pandemic. Secondly, we had much weaker

contractual entitlements relating to sick pay, annual leave, and other benefits. We did not receive occupational sick pay and were only entitled to statutory sick pay (SSP). Sick pay at the time was £96.35 per week, and it would have been impossible to survive on this income alone. With my already low wage, losing even a day's full pay would have had difficult financial consequences for me.

10. I was very lucky that I was one of the only people who didn't catch Covid during this period. Nearly all my colleagues who continued working after the pandemic started fell ill with Covid, and most of them were severely impacted financially as a result. I had some colleagues who were not paid at all during their sickness absences. As such, I was extremely reluctant to take any sickness absences even though the impact of the situation on my mental health meant that I often felt so awful I didn't feel capable of working.
11. There was also a policy in the hospital, which I think is both absurd and cruel, that if an outsourced worker falls ill whilst at work in the hospital, they would not be treated there. Instead, the private hospital insisted that they be sent to an NHS hospital. On one occasion, a colleague had a heart attack whilst working at the hospital, but the hospital staff refused to treat her or even to perform first aid. Instead, they called an ambulance and my colleague had to wait until she could reach a NHS hospital to receive urgent, life-saving treatment.

*Personal protective equipment (PPE)*

12. There was also a stark difference in the personal protective equipment (PPE) provided to in-house clinical staff and to outsourced workers. Clinical workers at the hospital had access to full PPE including gloves, aprons, masks, visors – all of which were of a better quality than our own PPE. However, there was no apparent understanding that as decontamination staff, we also had a very high risk of exposure to Covid-19. We were only provided with surgical masks [FRSM], and there were usually not enough of these to go around so we would have to reuse them. In an attempt to protect myself, I sometimes took additional PPE from the stores intended for clinical staff.

13. I would try to ensure I had enough gloves and masks, sometimes doubling up layers of these, to protect myself and to attempt to prevent cross-contamination. However, I received no training about what type of PPE I needed, how to put it on or how to safely remove and dispose of it. As such, I had very little information about whether or not the PPE I had would protect me. I changed my mask every four hours, but I only did this on advice from a relative who is a nurse in Colombia.
14. At some stage during the pandemic, I **don't know** when exactly, there was an instance where my supervisor came to work with Covid symptoms and was not wearing a face mask. I was scared when I heard of this and tried to avoid him and wear additional PPE. Following this, one of my colleagues fell ill for several days, **though he couldn't confirm if this was Covid as he didn't have access to Covid testing at the time.** Outsourced staff were given self-testing kits later in the pandemic, in 2021 or 2022. I **don't recall exactly when.** We were all given one box of testing kits each. They were not available to us when my colleague fell ill.
15. As far as I am aware, there were no checks or assessments of the hospital or of the outsourced company for compliance with health and safety regulations or IPC guidelines during the pandemic.

*Impact on physical and mental wellbeing*

16. I suffered with severe anxiety throughout the pandemic, and for a long time after. I was constantly worrying that I would catch the virus, about what might happen to my health, and how if I could not work that I might lose my home and end up destitute. It often felt that it was only a matter of time before this happened. I felt I had no choice but to continue working and I felt terrified and hopeless working for an employer that seemed not to care at all about my wellbeing. I worried about my family in Colombia and their safety, and tragically I lost my father during this period.
17. My anxiety caused me to lose a lot of weight, and my friends and colleagues often told me I needed to be careful because I risked getting severely ill from this level of weight loss. I **didn't go to the GP during this time because I was paranoid** about going anywhere and increasing my risk of catching Covid any further. I

also had experienced bad treatment by the GP in the past which further deterred me from going there. Instead, I just got support over the phone from my sister who just recommended deep breathing and taking vitamins.

18. Neither the outsourced company nor the hospital management ever asked me about my wellbeing, physical or mental. They made no effort to monitor this or to mitigate my rapidly declining mental and physical health. I could see my colleagues were also suffering mentally and physically, and whilst some people did complain, no action was ever taken. I felt that they wanted us to work no matter what, and that if we did not try to take care of ourselves and each other, that no one would.
19. Over time the anxiety of what I went through during this time has lessened, but it took a very long time and continuous effort on my part to recover. Despite what we went through, we still have not received the recognition we deserve. We still receive low pay, no improvement to our contractual protections, and dismissive responses to our grievances. Working in this hospital throughout the pandemic, particularly as an outsourced worker, has been a seriously traumatic experience, and one that I would not wish on anybody.

### Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Personal Data

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

13 August 2024

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_

