

# ASOS union campaign

**A union has launched a campaign to recruit ASOS workers in Grimethorpe following allegations of exploitative working conditions in the online fashion warehouse.**

The retailer, which is projected to turn over £1 billion by next year, is accused of bullying staff, forcing them to work exhausting ten-hour shifts for minimum breaks, holiday and pay, and setting punishing targets that are almost impossible to reach.

Workers have described conditions in the Barnsley-based warehouse as "hell".

## 'Drawn-out battle'

Unite, the union, aims to sign up 40 per cent of the plant's 2,000-plus workforce to become members – which will give it legal permission to open formal negotiations with warehouse management.

Phil Bown, Unite regional organiser for North East Yorkshire and Humberside, said the union plans to canvass staff outside the gates.

"It is going to be a long drawn-out battle but we are used to them," said Bown. "We have to have a firm approach."

"If it falls down at the first hurdle it will be very difficult to get negotiations going."

He said local activists have been motivated to take action following *The Big Issue in the North's* coverage of conditions in the plant (issue 1009).

Run by contractors Norbert

## Fashion fail

One of the largest online fashion stores in the country, ASOS expects to do a roaring trade at Christmas. But as Helen Clifton reports, staff at its South Yorkshire warehouse aren't feeling that festive as they complain about low pay, poor conditions and harsh management

Workers and unions have described conditions in online fashion retailer ASOS's huge Grimethorpe warehouse as "hell, degrading and exploitative".

The fast-growing company, whose sales leapt 40 per cent to £284 million and dressed Samantha Cameron at the Conservative Party conference, is accused of bullying staff, forcing them to work exhausting ten-hour shifts for minimum breaks, holiday and pay, and setting punishing targets that are almost impossible to reach.

One anonymous worker, who worked in the Barnsley warehouse for seven months between 2011 and early 2012, says it was "hell".

"It was really intense. The pressure was on all the time. People were getting sick continually because they didn't get up to their quotas. One girl was quite emotional because the boss was hitting the targets. They just got rid of her."

"You were searched with metal detectors when you took toilet breaks. Some of the guards had their hands all over the ladies."

"The people who like see the people who never see us. They are the people who don't take the day off to go to the doctor – they just stick on and pretend taking

strict and treated people so badly. At the end I just walked out, I couldn't take it anymore."

The pickers who select orders from the floor of the 1.1 million sq ft warehouse – the size of six football pitches, with 26 miles of walkways – say they are expected to pick up to 170 items per hour. Yet despite having to walk up to eight miles a day, breaks are kept to the minimum 20 minutes per six hours allowed under legislation.

During a 10-hour shift, pickers have a 45-minute break, of which 15 minutes is spent walking to and from the rest area. Half an hour of the break is unpaid.

A "flex system" demands that staff work extra-long 10-hour shifts six days a week during times of high demand. Shifts can be extended with just two hours' notice.

Warehouse workers are paid £6.41 an hour – just 10 pence more than the minimum wage – with no extra pay for working bank holidays. Staff have to use holiday to take Christmas Day off, even though this is the only day that the warehouse is closed.

Workers also allege that managers regularly fail to accurately record holiday entitlement, and that accidents are common.

In some part of the warehouses up to half of all staff are from agencies. Agency staff can only become permanent after three months. The



"It's the minimum wage for maximum hours with minimum breaks," says Phil Bown, Unite regional organiser for North East Yorkshire and Humberside. "They have dismissed people who came back two minutes late from a break – because they know people there have no union protection." Grimethorpe, a former mining community, has struggled economically. A year after its colliery closed in 1993, it was listed as the poorest village in England. Yet investment has helped the area recover. Barnsley Council figures show that, in the year up to December 2012, the number of jobs in the area increased by 1.2 per cent, a figure still lower than the 2.1 per cent national average. Much of this economic revival is built on the investment of Asos, which built the warehouse on the site of the former Grimethorpe Colliery. Run by contractors Norbert Dentressangle (ND), it employs more than 2,000 people. There are plans to create a further 800 jobs, and double the plant's storage capacity. Asos is a huge success story with 6.5 million active users, asos.com is the world's most visited fashion website, per day by 18-34 year olds, and ships to customers in more than 200 countries. But Unite says the company has got the local council "over a barrel", and is free to exploit desperate workers. "Because this government stated that if you don't get people are desperate for a family – this company government got with other people to give us a better future."

## Our coverage of ASOS conditions in December prompted activists to act

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got local politicians "over a barrel" and is free to exploit workers desperate for jobs.

But, it adds, a high turnover of staff and large numbers of Eastern European workers have made it hard for it to galvanise support.

"There is a really high turnover so it is difficult to get

the membership we need to take action," said Bown. "But Norbert Dentressangle recognise Unite in some of their other factories, so we are hopeful."

## Recognition

If Unite is unable to achieve 40 per cent membership, it plans to get recognition by "statutory means" by making an application to the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) for recognition.

It must have 10 per cent membership to achieve this.

A Norbert Dentressangle spokesperson said: "Norbert Dentressangle and ASOS do not wish to comment beyond the fact that they take immense pride in providing a great many jobs and career opportunities for the people of Grimethorpe and the wider Barnsley community, and wish to concentrate on delivering a world class facility for their customer, without distractions."

Barnsley Council and East Barnsley MP Michael Dugher did not provide a comment.

LEWIS DOMINIC

HELEN CLIFTON

# Missing Bradford student appeal

**The family of a missing student from Bradford are appealing for information to help trace him.**

Aamir Qudeer has not been seen since he left his halls of residence, Forster Halls, in Bradford at 1.13pm on 26 February.

Aamir is extremely close to his family and his disappearance is completely out of character.

## Stright to voicemail

Aamir is 5ft 5ins tall and has a slim, athletic build. He was wearing a grey-sleeved and navy-bodied jacket, dark jogging



bottoms and dark shoes. He has two small dark scars on the outer edge of his left hand.

After leaving Forster Halls, he caught a train to Leeds station

from Bradford Interchange, arriving at around 3pm. He then caught a train to Liverpool, and arrived at Liverpool Lime Street at approximately 6.15pm. He was then seen on foot on Mulgrave Street but not since.

Calls to his phone go straight to voicemail. He missed his 21st birthday on 3 April and his family are distressed by his disappearance.

Anyone with information should call the police on 101 or the Missing People charity on its free hotline 116 000.