

Eat the rich

My experience in hospitality work during the pandemic

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With a provisional date set for the gradual reopening of the hospitality sector in UK, now seems a prescient moment to reflect upon the experiences of hospitality staff during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While many staff will feel grateful to have a return date set in their diaries (albeit provisionally), we should reject the much posited idea of a 'return to normal'. Accepting such a move lets both government and employers – many of whom have behaved disgracefully in the last twelve months – off the hook. While the government's furlough scheme has ensured hospitality staff have had a source of income and have jobs to return to in May, we should not accept the bare minimum as anywhere close to enough.

For starters, there seems little reason why staff couldn't have been paid at 100% of their normal monthly pay, as opposed to the 80% the scheme currently offers. Given the base rate for hospitality is often minimum wage (and even less for those under twenty-one or on apprenticeship wages), arbitrarily cutting 20% of earnings only heaps financial pressure on those already struggling. While work may have stopped temporarily, food, clothes and other basic necessities cost no less, while mortgages and rent to landlords (not known for their compassion in times of crisis) still need to be paid.

Another pitfall of the furlough scheme, which some of my colleagues experienced first hand, is its reliance upon the competence and honesty of employers. Management teams fiddling with staff hours to make meagre savings is not a new phenomenon, but in the context of furlough – where staff pay is already reduced – the practice is even more reprehensible. For example, a staff member with two children will work around child care, so they may do two 10 shifts and one shorter 5 hour shift a week, totalling 25 hours. However, there have been instances of employers under-reporting staff hours, so the person working 25 hours in normal times is only paid (again at 80%) for 20. Such discrepancies are not only grossly irresponsible, they hurt workers in an industry already both low-paid and precarious.

Rumours of a second instalment of the Chancellor's 'Eat out to help out' scheme will also fill those working in the hospitality sector with a sense of foreboding. While much may have been

made of the scheme in August – the press and government blustered plenty of platitudes about how it would ‘restart’ the economy – the reality for those working it was hellish. While the big chains made plenty of lip-service about staff health and safety being a priority during the pandemic, this sits in stark contrast to what myself and many colleagues experienced: management teams cannot claim to value the wellbeing of staff while they continue to cut corners, solely to maximise profits for unaccountable CEOs and board members. While the UK’s first lockdown was undoubtedly lifted too soon, it is not within the remit of this article to offer analysis of every (of the many) government failures from during the last 12 months.

Hospitality businesses reopened last July under the assurance they would implement measures to ensure safe social distancing – this included things like reduced capacity and introducing track and trace forms for customers. While the nature of work in the industry does make social distancing nigh on impossible at times (especially for those of us working in already cramped kitchens), it was telling just how quickly senior management teams abandoned all pretence of safety once ‘Eat out to help out’ was launched. Cramming in table upon table of guests would be negligent behaviour at any juncture, but during a pandemic there is no justification.

Another trend prevalent throughout the scheme was staff sickness, owing to overwork and understaffing. While anyone who has ever worked a bar or restaurant job knows there will be certain periods in a week (often a Friday and Saturday) where you will be busy, staff being worked at an unrelenting pace – there were a couple of days where staff were forced to go without breaks – for a month is not healthy.

Management machinations did not stop at understaffing and overworking during ‘Eat out to help out’. As the months progressed (and Covid cases rose), more and more staff had to take time off to self-isolate. While frustrating, the bosses did at least attempt to maintain a semblance of transparency at first by keeping staff informed about self isolation. Such transparency soon vanished however, when the head chef tested positive for Covid. Despite displaying symptoms (a dry cough and fatigue), the person in question filled in the daily Covid check (for which normal staff were routinely badgered) online declaring himself fit for work and attended work on at least two separate occasions. Once the positive test had been shared with kitchen staff, people were both upset and angry. A number of staff had been in close contact with the head chef – who had insisted he was fine – so were justifiably concerned they could have contracted Covid themselves. Rather than condemning the head chef’s behaviour and allowing other staff to self isolate, which would have been the correct procedure, management instead decided to close ranks and add further deceit to the situation: at a gathering of the kitchen team, we were informed not to seek Covid tests and to carry on as normal, as well as being told the head chef had followed the ‘correct protocols’. Such blatant gaslighting would have been deceitful enough, but kitchen staff were also told not to share the news of the head chef’s positive test, as this could cause ‘disruption to the business’. While the above is just one example in one industry, it is indicative of a wider issue present throughout the pandemic: namely the interests of Capital and its lackeys taking precedent over the safety and wellbeing of the working class. Data on Covid deaths in the UK from last year evidences this point, showing those working in precarious industries – including chefs – far more likely to die from Covid than the general population.

What can be done? In short: educate, agitate, and (most importantly) organise. We have to remember we only have each other, and only by fighting against bosses’ dirty tricks will we be successful in improving our lives. Platitudes about ‘a return to normal’ also deliberately misconstrue the fact life was miserable for those working in precarious industries well before Covid.

Shorter working weeks with no loss of earnings, better wages for all and vastly improved sick and holiday pay should be our minimum demands. It will not come through pandering to politicians, of social democratic stripes or otherwise. Indeed, the Labour Party seems more interested echoing far-right talking points about “British Interests” and cosying up to Capital, than it does in fighting for reduced working hours and better workplace protections.

Direct action and revolutionary trade unions will deliver far more change than pinning our hopes on electoralism. Even doing small things like chatting to coworkers about their frustrations/concerns is a good starting point. Our own list of pandemic demands, including free PPE and 25 hour working weeks with no reduction in pay, gives a snapshot of the things we should be fighting for. Hospitality staff, like workers in so many industries, have been treated as disposable by both bosses and the State during the pandemic of the last year (and beforehand). No more. We should use our rage to build a better world.

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