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Checkout: Life On The Tills

Ed Walsh

21 May 2010

“Anna Sam”, as you might guess, is a pseudonym, the handle of a French blogger who decided to put her years behind the till to good use on a website describing the day-to-day experience of supermarket workers in all its tedious glory. In a way it’s refreshing to discover that the psychology of the checkout girl / boy appears to be the same wherever you go — my own days at Centra and the like are well imprinted on the brain, but they could have been an atypical reflection of my general misanthropy, grumpiness and ill will towards the rest of the species. But Anna reports more or less the same irritations — the only difference being that, on account of her gender, she must also bat away the sleazy or sheepish advances of French manhood on a daily basis.

Many of her observations will prompt a smile of recognition from anyone who has done this kind of work. To begin with, you have the ludicrous ritual of the McJob interview, with the standard “*Why do you want to work with us?*” question. She runs through a list of possible answers: “*Because I always dreamed of working behind a till*” is difficult to say with enough conviction and enthusiasm, but if you tell them “*I need a job to live*” you will be marked down for “*not being motivated*”

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Retrieved on 17th December 2021 from www.wsm.ie

Published in the *Irish Anarchist Review* Issue 1.

theanarchistlibrary.org

or “*lacking team spirit*”. One of the main French supermarket chains is called Champion — apparently it goes down a treat with them if you say “*I want to be a champion!*”, although it wouldn’t work so well with their rival Carrefour (“*I want to be a crossroads!*” would just sound weird).

Anna gives a good breakdown of the irregularity of working hours which rules out any kind of normal family life for staff. One standard week, she reports, involves the following schedule:

Monday — 9 — 2.30 (16 minutes break),

Tuesday — day off,

Wednesday — 3 — 8.45 (17 minutes break),

Thursday — 1.45 — 5.15 (9 minutes break),

Friday — 3.15 — 9 (17 minutes break),

Saturday — 9 — 1 / 3.30 — 9.15 (12 minutes break / 17 minutes break).

And then a completely different timetable the following week, prepared anything between 15 days and 24 hours in advance (Sunday doesn’t make an appearance on that list, because the French still have a civilised aversion to opening on the day which the Good Lord established for those recovering from hangovers).

In general, though, the blog entries / chapters concentrate on the foibles of customers, not the iniquities of the employer. This is also pretty accurate as I remember it — there’s only a handful of grievances you can level at the company that hires you (not enough pay / too many hours / shit breaks / rubbish music on repeat hour after hour) but the things customers do to irritate you are almost inexhaustibly varied. The introduction of the plastic bag tariff has introduced a new one since my barcode-scanning days, apparently — Anna recounts the daily stand-off with customers who pay by credit card, then suddenly demand a fistful of bags after punching in their code and lose the rag when they are reminded that you have to pay for the buggers nowadays. Some

things don’t change, though — the stray customers who insist on hanging around well after closing time so they can get a few more cakes are a particular source of annoyance (I was on the pig’s back when I had a job that left me in charge of shutting up shop for the night — if there was anybody still there at five to eleven they’d be chased off with a bout of aggressive Hoovering around their feet).

This book is an easy read, but it would probably be more enjoyable in its original format, as a short blog entry to be digested every couple of days — once you start reading the chapters one after one for a few hours at a time, it gets to be a bit repetitive (you can find the original blog, boasting 13 million hits when I last checked). This is a cyber-genre that I’d like to see take off in Ireland — the nature of that kind of work makes traditional forms of collective action like forming a union very difficult, so a few blogs could help people generate a bit of common purpose or at least common thinking among workers in this end of the economy. It’d be a good start just to have some more information about people’s experiences of casual work in the retail trade.

Of course, for all I know there already are a rake load of blogs just like that, but they’re a closed book to me because I don’t speak Chinese or Polish. I’d love to see a similar account by one of the Chinese guys who work in 24-hour garages (another thing they don’t really have in France). Anna’s chronicles of everyday idiocy surely wouldn’t hold a candle to the gormless antics of Ireland’s nocturnal shoppers.