

A Plan for the Future of Retail Work



Retail jobs and retail workers are vital to our economy and society. They are at the heart of our town centres and communities. For many young workers, retail is their first experience of work, while it can also offer flexible opportunities to help balance other commitments such as being a parent or carer.

Despite this, more than 17,000 sites shut up shop in 2022 – the highest number for five years with total closures nearly 50% higher than in 2021.

The crisis in retail is not a new development; even before the more recent challenges of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, the sector was at breaking point. There was a clear need for fundamental reform on issues such as business rates, rents and taxation. Usdaw has been campaigning for measures to support the sector and retail jobs for several years launching our *Industrial Strategy for Retail* in 2019 followed by our *Retail Recovery Plan* in 2021.

The retail industry directly employs three million people, with a further 1.5 million jobs reliant on the success of the sector. Yet the Government continues to treat retail jobs as an afterthought. This needs to change; we cannot continue with a situation whereby retail jobs are synonymous with low pay, insecure hours, and abuse at work. This is not just bad for workers, but for the industry and wider economy.

Retail staff both need and deserve to be given a much better, fairer deal and ultimately if we want the sector to prosper, we need to make sure retail jobs are better jobs.

As such, Usdaw is calling for a plan for the future of retail work based on the following measures:

- Better pay and secure work: an immediate increase in the NMW to £12 per hour as a step towards £15 – to help drive engagement and productivity in the sector. Better work must go beyond basic pay and include improvements to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and Respect for Shopworkers through 'Protection of Workers' legislation.
- The delivery of a new economic framework to support retail growth and drive investment in good quality retail jobs. This includes tackling business rates and the lack of parity between online and physical retailers to help support investment and growth across the industry and deliver greater job security.
- Support with retraining and upskilling, with a strong focus on skills and development in the context of technology/ automation and the transition to net zero. In terms of delivery, we need fundamental reform of the Apprenticeship Levy which is not fit for purpose.
- Fair treatment and equality for all retail workers: diversity and inclusion must do much more than just pay lip service. We need more robust action from both employers and Government to create a respectful, inclusive work environment within which every worker has the opportunity to thrive.
- Stronger protections for retail workers: Usdaw will continue to deliver a true voice for retail workers, giving them a stronger voice and say on the issues that matter to them at work. However, this needs to be supported by strengthened trade unions rights and protections against redundancy.

Paddy Lillis
Usdaw General Secretary

Ensuring Retail Jobs Are Better Jobs



Usdaw is the UK's fifth largest trade union and operates solely within the private sector. The Union has around 360,000 members across many sectors, but the majority of our members work in retail. This gives Usdaw a direct insight into the difficult nature of retail work and the challenges that workers in the sector are facing on a daily basis.

The cost of living crisis has created further hardships for retail workers. Usdaw believes more needs to be done to protect retail workers and deliver better quality and more secure jobs. Usdaw is calling for a robust plan for the future of retail work built on the following measures and priorities:

A New Economic Framework

- Fundamental Reform of Business Rates.
- Reform of tax laws to ensure that companies pay their fair share of tax through tackling tax avoidance, evasion, and the use of offshore havens.
- A comprehensive review of rents and leases to ensure the right measures are in place (including through legislation) to support a collaborative relationship between landlords and retailers.
- Action to ensure adequate funding for local authorities so that councils can plan ahead and invest in their high streets, local jobs and wider communities.

Better Pay and Secure Work

- An immediate increase in the minimum wage to £12 per hour, as a step towards £15 per hour. We also need to end the rip-off youth rates in the minimum wage.
- Secure work including a ban on exploitative zero-hours contracts and a right to switch to a contract that reflects normal hours.
- Greater recognition of the link between good pay, secure work, productivity and customer service.
- Improved sick pay – statutory sick pay is not enough to live on. SSP needs to be paid from day one, and available to all workers.
- A proper social security system – the current system does not provide the safety net that families need with many being pushed deeper into poverty. We need a fair system that protects families and treats people with dignity.

Skills Development and Training

- Significant and long-term investment in skills funding.
- Paid time off for retraining, to support the development of lifetime skills.
- A fully costed education programme to give workers the vocational skills needed for the future of work.
- Fundamental reform of the Apprenticeship Levy scheme so it is accessible to all workers, with a focus on opportunities for those facing disadvantages in the Labour Market.
- A voice for workers in all discussions on skills strategy.

New Technology and Automation

- Employers to consult with workers, and their representatives, on all decisions related to new technology at work.
- The introduction of safeguards against discrimination when workplace technology is implemented.
- A right to switch off – lessons can be learned from countries where similar provisions have already been successfully introduced.

A Just Transition to Net Zero

- Adequate safeguards to protect retail workers on the path to net zero, including co-ordinated public policy initiatives and legislation.
- Retail workers must be at the centre of any plans or legislation to ensure a fair and just transition. The decarbonisation of industries will have a major impact on the lives of working people therefore they must be wholly represented and consulted.
- Economic policies and public investments that offer long-term sustainable growth for retail and a better deal for working people.
- A robust plan for retail, devised in co-ordination with unions and workers, to protect and create good quality retail jobs right across the UK to ensure a just transition to net zero.

Freedom From Fear: Abuse Is Not Part of the Job

- Engagement with politicians and the police, to press for action on retail crime prevention, detection, and access to justice.
- Adequate security provisions in stores, along with sufficient staffing levels. Employers and the police must also do more to inspire confidence in reporting, ensuring effective investigations are conducted and all reports are taken seriously.
- Simpler and easier reporting procedures; current confusing processes can deter workers from reporting incidents.
- Significant investment in training by employers to support staff when attempting to deal with challenging scenarios in store.
- The introduction of legislative provisions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, that mirror those already introduced in Scotland.

A Voice for Retail Workers Through Strengthened Protections

- A significant reduction in the statutory thresholds for trade union recognition to ensure effective worker voice in discussions, such as those around working hours.
- Stronger protection against redundancy.
- A personal retraining budget for all workers to ensure the best chance of re-entering the workplace as soon as possible.
- A significant increase in Statutory Redundancy Pay.
- Closing the loophole where in locations with less than 20 employees, employees are not entitled to redundancy consultation even where the decision affects more than 20 people across the business.
- Strengthening protection against redundancy and health and safety rights for pregnant women and new mothers.

Improve Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Across the Sector

- Robust action, including strengthening the Equality Act 2010 and rights at work, to ensure certain groups of workers are not left behind.
- Extension of the duty on employers to publish their pay gap data.
- Extension of the duty to conduct Equality Impact Assessments to help identify disproportionate risk to workers with protected characteristics and use action plans to mitigate the impact.
- Reinstatement of protections against third party harassment and introducing a new duty on employers to take positive steps to prevent sexual harassment.
- Action to strengthen flexible working rights, particularly for low paid workers. This includes reform of family friendly rights, day one rights for all working parents and high quality, accessible, affordable childcare.
- Legislation to strengthen the right to reasonable adjustments and support for disabled workers, including making it simpler to secure reasonable adjustments in a timely manner in situations such as when changing jobs or when circumstances change.



Experiences from the Shop Floor



What Retail Work Looks Like

Retail work is 24/7, mentally and physically demanding, multi-skilled, high pressure, profit driven, and target led. Retail workers have to be adaptable and dynamic, responding to rapid changes in a fast-moving consumer driven industry. Despite the demands of the job, many retail workers and their families are facing impossible decisions just to make ends meet. While everyone has been affected by the rising cost of living, retail workers have been at the sharp end of it.

The following testimonies were obtained from interviews with retail workers (names have been changed to protect anonymity).

Rachel

Rachel has worked in retail for over 40 years. Rachel's employer has introduced several changes related to new technology such as the use of online payslips. Since her payslip has gone online, Rachel has been unable to access a payslip with any reliability. Every time her manager sets up the account, by the time she comes around to accessing it next time her account needs resetting. This has led to her not having a reliable way of checking her pay. When holiday booking and shift patterns went on to an app, Rachel went to tell her manager she was having trouble using it and said "they looked at me like I had two heads, they were clearly thinking, 'Why can't you do this?'". Rachel still has a large chunk of her holidays to book for this year because of these issues.



Emma

Emma has worked in retail for 21 years. Emma spoke to us about how low pay in retail makes it very difficult for staff members with childcare to work and still earn enough money to live on, and how the cost of living crisis has made this situation even worse. The maximum hours that Emma is able to get in a week is 20 and for a lot of this time when she's working these hours, she ends up having to pay childcare costs to go into work. The childcare that is available to her is mostly only available between 8-6, meaning when she is offered overtime outside of these hours, she often has to turn it down.

Emma told us that the low pay and the low hours made it difficult for staff to think about working in retail as their main careers - most colleagues had to work at least one other job in order to make ends meet.

Gavin

Gavin has worked in various retail companies for a number of years. While Gavin tells us that age restricted sales have always been a trigger for abuse of shopworkers he noticed a sharp uptake in abuse during the Covid pandemic when they had to enforce restrictions. More recently the cost of living crisis is taking its toll with an increase in abuse from customers feeling the financial pressures of the crisis, as well as an increase in shoplifting in stores. Gavin told us he had witnessed a member of the public verbally abusing a staff member because they were unable to exchange a defective air fryer as there were no replacements in stock. Despite this, in Gavin's store there has been a downturn in security staff being on duty during shifts. Gavin suggested to us that the amount of shrinkage he's seen would easily pay for the wages of security staff, and not only reduce costs to the company but also leave the staff feeling safer.

