

# Essential supermarket workers face everyday suffering and managerial abuse, study finds

May 15 2020

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The coronavirus outbreak has highlighted how important essential supermarket workers are, but in reality, they are often amongst the most poorly paid and undervalued employees within our society.

A newly-published book by Dr. Alex Wood, lecturer in the Sociology of

Work at the University of Birmingham, is founded on his research into [precarious work](#).

Dr. Wood experienced the daily working life of employees at two of the largest retailers in the world, one in the UK and one in the US, by going undercover in the workplace to experience first-hand how these workers are being treated.

"Not only does my research within the book detail that low-pay and managerial abuse were rife, but also that these essential workers often face a scheduling nightmare as a result of the on-demand economy. At the drop of a hat, workers' hours would be changed, and they would no longer be able to make ends meet or their new schedule would make caring for their children and loved ones impossible," says Dr. Wood.

This scheduling nightmare is faced by 16% of all UK workers and 37% of all US workers and is concentrated in the retail sector. This is particularly concerning to Dr. Wood, as Rachel, a US [worker](#) explains that "You are just wondering like, "Oh my God, are they going to change my hours, are they going to cut my hours next week, am I going to have enough money for my rent next week?"

Through his research, he has also found that the insecurity caused by precarious scheduling practices, such as flexible, short, and zero-hour contracts, is not only harmful to the wellbeing of workers, but managers often take advantage of this precariousness to 'flexibly discipline' workers.

The findings show that if a worker is deemed not to be working hard enough or to have a 'bad attitude' they could be punished simply by having their hours reduced or their shift rescheduled. Derek, a worker in the UK, said that his colleagues "are terrified of not getting any more shifts and being stuck with this three-and-a-half or seven hours a week,

which they can't live on [...] Being desperate for some extra hours, they depend on the mood of the manager for their income [...] Once your face doesn't fit you don't get any more hours."

"With the current crisis making clear how much we rely on low-paid and undervalued employees, I hope this book demonstrates that these workers deserve a 'new normal' in which despotic precarious scheduling is eradicated from the workplace," says Dr. Wood.

**More information:** Despotism on Demand: How Power Operates in the Flexible Workplace: [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/b...n-demand/#bookTabs=1](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/b...n-demand/#bookTabs=1)

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Essential supermarket workers face everyday suffering and managerial abuse, study finds (2020, May 15) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-05-essential-supermarket-workers-everyday-managerial.html>

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