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Working conditions and protective measures in multinational companies during the pandemic: The case of Inditex

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected working life. Workers who have to earn money to proceed with their lives have had to work during this time, even if they did not want to do so. Consequently, the question of whether adequate protective measures have been taken in the workplace for workers who have had to work during the pandemic is a critical one. In this article, the measures taken especially in respect of employees of multinational companies are examined in view of a survey of employees of Inditex, the Spanish 'fast fashion' company. Following a review of the literature on the place of multinational companies, along with their supply chains, in the engine room of global capitalism and on research into the working conditions of shopping mall employees, setting an appropriate context for the survey findings, the article explores what the findings reveal. Malls might well be new venues of insecurity in terms of the threat posed to the need for workplaces to be safe and secure for employees, but Covid-19 has ruthlessly exposed both the lack of protection and the risks which workers in such environments face on a day-to-day basis.

Keywords: *Covid-19, multinationals, shopping malls, working conditions, health and safety, PPE*

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has engulfed the world and left it facing a health crisis. Since the pandemic was announced, almost all countries have tried to support markets within the framework of their economic capacities by preparing and implementing action plans to combat the virus. In addition, the health crisis continues deeply to affect all aspects of social life and, furthermore, its effects are being felt particularly acutely by countries and their peoples already experiencing long-lasting economic crisis. Therefore, in countries such as Turkey, which cannot finance a halt to its economy, workers who are again on the front line of keeping the wheels turning, despite the pandemic, are being compelled to go to work under dangerous conditions. Capital is struggling with the government to keep businesses open to continue accumulation while workers are trapped between work, disease and hunger. Obviously, working in the conditions of a pandemic has, in this respect, also become a new front in the labour-capital struggle which continues in almost all sectors of the economy. In other words, the class struggle and the conflict of interest that has been going on for nearly 250 years has made itself particularly visible during the pandemic.

This article examines the working conditions of workers in multinational companies during the pandemic. It studies working conditions not across all multinational companies but draws its example from one company operating in the retail textile (so-called 'fast fashion') sector. In this context, the aim of our study is to determine and analyse the working conditions of workers in Inditex, a multinational company of Spanish origin with brand outlets in shopping malls, who have continued to work during the pandemic as well as the nature and level of the protective measures which have been taken on their behalf. One aim of the study is to discover whether the opening of shopping malls has had an impact on the spread of the pandemic. Additionally, the work has been motivated by controversies as to whether multinational corporations are exploiting and mistreating their workers by working them under the conditions of Covid-19.

To these ends, multinational companies and working conditions will first be discussed before we turn to the literature in general on the nature of labour and working conditions for those working in shopping malls during the pandemic. Later, we look at the protective measures taken regarding employees in the Inditex group alongside an analysis of the results of the survey we have carried out to determine working conditions in this sector.

Multinational corporations and labour

Multinational corporations (MNCs) appeared after the Second World War. Initially, they were greeted with great enthusiasm because productive capacity, technology, industrial production and income distribution have been viewed as powerful entities for economic development through the promotion of a more equitable distribution across the globe. However, over time, it has been seen that they have had no effects in this direction and MNCs started to move to the centre of criticism, being the subject of significant attention from US and British trade unions in particular, especially as regards the contraction in local employment along with the export of technology with which they had become associated (Gomes 1978: 118).

The concept is used differently in the literature with expressions such as 'multinational corporation', 'multinational company', 'multinational enterprise' and 'international company' used interchangeably to identify companies operating in more than one country and creating added value (Dunning and Lundan 2008; Hijzen 2008; Sklar 1976). On the other hand, there is also the view that it is not correct to evaluate multinational companies alone. Palloix (1975: 85) has claimed that MNCs are part of the broader internationalisation process of capital while Gomes (1978: 119) points out that, in order for a company to be considered truly transnational, it must have the capacity to carry out export activity, foreign licensing and joint venture overseas operations and multinational operations.

With neoliberalism, multinational companies have begun to make their influence felt more globally. The collapse of the Soviet bloc, advances in information technologies, deregulation in all areas including labour markets and the liberalisation of the market have been influential in the rapid spread of multinational corporations over the past three decades (Yeganeh 2019: 193). There has, however, been criticism that multinationals create competitive inequality by taking advantage of low wages

and working conditions in developing countries while they have even been accused of violating human rights, especially workers' rights (Hijzen 2008).

Starting in the 1990s in the US, multinationals such as Levi Strauss, Gap, Phillips-Van Heusen, etc. have become the subject of 'anti-sweatshop'-style campaigns on the grounds that they condoned undesirable working practices in other countries. Similarly the large retailer Wal-Mart, selling clothing made using child labour in the manufacture of clothing in Bangladesh and Honduras, put into question the activities of multinational companies (Brown *et al*. 2003: 4). Nevertheless, some data exists that multinational companies have a positive impact on wages and working conditions, especially in developing countries where they invest (OECD 2008a; OECD 2008b).

Since the 1980s, global framework agreements (GFAs) have been striven for by international trade union federations to protect the economic and social rights of workers in multinational companies. GFAs have been sought to prevent the exploitation of labour that may arise from multinational companies, particularly in underdeveloped and developing countries. The first such agreement was signed in 1988 between the International Union of Food Workers and BSN, whose name was later changed to Danone (Gallin 2008: 26). However after the 2000s we see the signing of international agreements with transnational companies in a wide range of sectors from mining to telecommunications, manufacturing and retail trade (Graham and Bibby 2002).

The purpose of global framework agreements is to protect and enhance the economic and social rights of employees, especially trade union rights, in multinational companies. However, there have been observations that GFAs have been signed by multinational companies as a means of being seen to fulfil their social responsibilities as opposed to being particularly positive on the labour front (Stevis and Boswell 2007: 188).

The result is that those multinational corporations that have become the engine of global capitalism are in a controversial position in areas such as wages, working conditions, union rights, etc. In particular the presence of cheap labour in developing countries as well as the tax exemptions and the privileged support from governments, such as making the labour market more flexible, are attractive to multinational companies. Multinationals are often referred to in terms of the confiscation of the surplus value produced by workers, sometimes directly and sometimes in the form of work intensification. The latterday question is the extent to which this situation might have changed in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study on which this article draws has been set up to deliver an answer to this question.

Shopping malls as the latest link in the capitalist production commodity chain

It is clear from a review of the literature on shopping malls that focused studies have been carried out in several different contexts. The architectural structures of shopping malls and their contributions to urban life have been heavily discussed (Gosseye and Avermaete 2015: 6). Stobart and Howard (2018) emphasise that shopping malls have attracted the attention of a wide range of academics from a diverse range of fields well beyond architecture and urban planning, including history, an-

thropology, sociology and management studies, due to their increasing importance in economic and cultural life. There have also been studies in the field of social sciences. Beiro and colleagues (2018) sought to measure the impact of shopping malls on cities' social inclusion policies. Shopping malls have also been studied in the context of urban life and contemporary consumption patterns (Erkip 2005; Zukin 1998). In her study, Zukin emphasises that discrepancies between daily consumption habits and new consumption areas make shopping malls a simulation of a globalised and standardised city life.

Ersoy (2018) describes shopping malls, which have become among the most important economic and social habitats of our time, as attractions of order while Baudrillard (2008: 20) describes them as a synthesis of abundance and design. The seventh largest shopping mall in the world, in terms of gross leasable area, is Manila's SM Megamall which has a daily pedestrian traffic of 800,000 people and a maximum capacity of four million: the most concrete indicator that shopping malls have become attractions of daily life in their own right. When we take into account also that the Dubai Mall, which ranks fifth on the list of the largest malls, is home to 1,200 stores, 22 cinema screens, 120 cafes and restaurants, a 5-star hotel and one of the world's largest aquariums, we can also estimate the size of the consumer audience flowing into these venues (Touropia 2020).

Shopping malls have fundamentally decried traditional consumption habits: the service and product offered to the consumer/public has gone way beyond the traditional grocer shop. Therefore, shopping mall vendors are also carefully selected. Two types of party benefit from shopping malls: the first is the owners of, or investors in, the mall (as a structure); and the second is the store vendors (or brand owners). Mall owners obtain rental income from the vendors, while the latter draw revenue by selling products or goods and services that appeal directly to the types of consumer attracted into malls. In this way, the costs of the product offered for sale by those vendors who are able to pay shopping mall rents (commercial capital) are imposed directly and compulsorily on the consumer and accepted instinctively.

Depending on the locations of shopping malls, the services and products they offer for sale are changing and diversifying. A brand with the power to pay mall rents does not imply that it is able to participate in every shopping mall development. In practice, those brands in shopping malls that address upper income groups are separated from the ones that address lower- and middle-income groups (Erkip, 2005: 89). From here, we can say that retail capital follows a strategy of seeking to appeal to every income group. This also indirectly reinforces class separation in the context of both space and consumption.

It is also worth noting in this respect the work of Beiro and colleagues (2018) who analyse the mobile phone records of hundreds of thousands of customers in sixteen shopping malls in Santiago de Chile with a view to highlighting issues of social mixing in cities. According to the authors, shopping malls have an important place in the daily activities of modern cities, the structuring of social relations and the mobility of residents. Shopping malls are open and available to everyone from all walks of life and social classes but they are, in practice, venues which belonging to people from white middle- and upper-income classes. The clearest indicator of this is the

lack of public transportation infrastructure that would allow lower-middle income groups to reach shopping malls. It is underlined that this indirectly increases exclusion and discrimination against minorities and people from lower-income classes; something which Beiro and his colleagues are keen to address.

Products of both international and domestic brands are sold in shopping malls, with the latter also being of an international nature since many brands of Turkish origin are offered in different countries of the world. From here, we can also define shopping malls as centres of commerce that contribute to the movement of international capital.

We must be clear that the store vendors are not the manufacturers of the products sold on behalf of the international brands: using supply chains in countries where capitalist relations of exploitation are at their most intense, their colourful and attractive shopfronts in malls supply the consumer with goods produced for their brands by sub-contractors. Undoubtedly, the production of goods by suppliers – in other words, the business of the supply chain – lies not with the shopping malls. According to Özuğurlu:

> The supply chain or global production/commodity chain is the main form in the organisation of the capitalist production process, starting in the 1970s and gaining momentum and depth worldwide in the last three decades... The supply chain is the chain which generates value and confiscates the present value produced. (Özuğurlu 2009: 123)

Shopping malls have replaced the factory, market or fair of old. While factory order dominated the capitalist system in the past, factories have today been replaced by places of consumption such as shopping malls whose palaces are offered up by 'casino capitalism' as the new cathedrals of the consumer society (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 13-15). Indeed, the utilisation of goods and services, but also personal free time, is at the heart of the goal of shopping mall capital: alongside the purchasing of products, shopping malls also offer opportunities for purchasing entertainment services and food. The capitalist system, which commoditises everything, has managed to market options for the evaluation of free time to be presented to the consumer. And it does this today through shopping malls.

> Thus the filling of the time away from the job also becomes dependent upon the market, which develops to an enormous degree those passive amusements, entertainments, and spectacles that suit the restricted circumstances of the city and are offered as substitutes for life itself. Since they become the means of filling all the hours of 'free' time, they flow profusely from corporate institutions which have transformed every means of entertainment and 'sport' into a production process for the enlargement of capital. (Braverman 2008 [1974]: 263).

The nature of labour found in shopping malls

After the industrial revolution, developments in the manufacturing sector shaped production relations and, in this context, social relations. The emerging industrial society began to experience a new transformation after the Second World War, a transformation that was heralded as being from the industrial community to the service community (Bosch and Lehndorff 2005: 1). Lying at the heart of this transformation

was the expectation of better working conditions, higher wages and especially healthier workplaces for the masses who were unemployed at the end of the Second World War.

In recent decades, we have seen shopping malls become indispensable social spaces in urban living. The use of the concept of 'social space' here is a conscious choice: we can define social areas as places where socialisation is experienced/provided in a simple way. However, it should be stated that socialisation in shopping malls has taken on a socio-economic quality beyond that of simple definition. While shopping malls are seen by the consumer as areas of socialisation, for the shopping mall management and the owners of store retailers who provide services in them, they are, on the other hand, economic areas where commodities produced under capitalist production relations may be brought together with the consumer. Capitalist production relations within these places are thus processed to the finest detail. Özkaplan and his colleagues state that:

> Consumption today has become not only an economic phenomenon but also a social, cultural and psychological process with its own indicators and symbols. (Özkaplan *et al*. 2020: 245)

The phenomenon that makes shopping malls the trading base of neoliberalism is that the goods produced by brand-value multinational companies within the framework of the free movement of goods can be presented to the consumer at the same moment as different brands. In these places, however, it is the labour of the workers that brings together the consumer and the product. The amazing image and quality of service in shopping malls is founded upon the labour of workers in stores which supply hundreds of brands designed to meet every need.

Working conditions in shopping malls: New venues of insecurity

There have been many studies focusing on this issue. Ünsever (2014) has carried out a study on the class experiences of workers through a study of cleaning workers in shopping malls in Ankara. Başol and Saruhan (2018) examine the working conditions of shopping mall employees in the context of decent work, finding that the working environment was poor and extremely stressful, the work-life balance disturbed and decisions taken to improve working conditions not implemented. However, they do determine that:

> Nearly all employees are insured and occupational health and safety measures are being fulfilled. (Başol and Saruhan 2018: 140).

Like Başol and Saruhan, Özkaplan and his colleagues highlight in their study the problem of work-life balance, additionally establishing that no less than 99.3 per cent of employees are insured and that, in such a context, the:

> Sales business is among the limited number of secure workplaces in the service sector in Turkey. (Özkaplan *et al*. 2020: 80-81, 93).

Especially with developments in the fashion industry which have seen it gain a global dimension, the brand has started to stand out ahead of the quality of goods and services offered to the consumer. Brands are thus symbolising the creative fiction of a consumer society. Women and young people are used in the presentation and marketing of branded products in the fashion clothing industry, now defined as 'fast fashion', and thus shopping malls are workplaces where a higher number of women and young employees may be found. On this point, it has been seen in research studies in the field that these trends of employment based on age and gender have been making themselves felt since the 1990s. Başol and Saruhan, researching working conditions in shopping malls in the context of 'decent work', comment thus:

> Shopping malls are generally able to provide temporary employment to unqualified workers during the construction phase while, after being built, they can provide employment opportunities to women and young employees mainly in accordance with the working principles of the retail sector. (Başol and Saruhan 2018: 132)

Cindoğlu and Durakbaşa (1996) conducted field research to determine the level of discrimination associated with the feminisation of professions such as sales and clerical work. Extending their research, they have come to define the work done in these workplaces essentially as belonging to consumer communication professions since stereotypically 'female' qualities, such as beauty and attractiveness, have been developed into important assets in the name of service to others, regardless of the quality of work on offer in shopping malls.

Özkaplan *et al*. (2020) take a gender-based approach to working conditions in shopping malls, finding that the gender distribution of employees was close (53.5 per cent male and 46.5 per cent female) and that employees were predominantly in the 18-25 age group and with a high school graduate education level.

The occurrences of repetitive movement, intensive body control based on standing up for hours, correcting hangers, scanning products and packing them into bags, alongside the nature of temporary and flexible labour and long working hours, make shopping mall work tough for employees. Therefore, the worker turnover rate is high. Özkaplan and colleagues (2020: 72) explore this issue, concluding that long-term work in the same workplace is very rare. They determine that 42 per cent of employees in the 18-25 age group have been working in their current workplace for less than six months while those with service of five years or more account for just 17 per cent. From this data, they calculate that the average period of service in the same workplace was more than two years but less than three. They do conclude, however, that there is no significant gender-based difference in wages (Özkaplan *et al*. 2020: 95).

With retail trade being the basis of the service offered in shopping malls, it is possible to establish a direct face-to-face relationship with customers and, therefore, to be confronted with negative attitudes and behaviours from customers as well as from the employer. This is quite unlike the situation for those working in production. Indeed, verbal violence and the harassment of customers in stores is one of the most common problem areas (Giaccenno and Di Nunzio 2002: 4).

The offer of a hygienic, sterile, well-lit, well-heated or chilled, institutionalised environment in shopping malls makes them especially preferable to families (Durakbaşa and Cindoğlu 2002: 82). Tellingly, however, Ünsever (2014: 1) has established that the safe, clean and modern appearance of shopping malls hides this being ultimately dependent on the employment of workers from lower classes whose employment is neither secure nor safe.

Working conditions during the pandemic

The impact of an economic and social crisis which has been deepened by the Covid-19 pandemic is becoming more and more severe. The working class compelled to go into work in the midst of all this are being forced into a choice between absence and existence. In this process, we see a reflection of the brutal capitalism of 250 years ago: workers are forced to work with profit in view despite the risk to their lives.

Whether adequate safety measures are being taken for employees in this process is a matter of debate. However, the data indicates that not enough measures have been taken. It is known that the most effective way to protect against the pandemic is to observe the rules of hygiene, masks and distance. However, it is clear that this is not the case in workplaces in which workers are crowded together. Workers in mines, factories, markets and shopping malls alike are thus endangered in the name of capital accumulation with Covid-19 cases among workers in such workplaces increasing every day due to the insufficient measures on offer (Çakır 2020).

A study by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) finds that, at global level, governments have started to withdraw from support while lay-offs from workplaces continue to increase (ITUC 2020). There have been several research studies carried out into the working conditions of workers during the pandemic. Studies conducted on behalf of retail workers in the UK, Ireland and Turkey establish that workers are not adequately protected and are suffering losses of income while being increasingly infected with coronavirus (USDAW 2020; Mandate 2020; Karadoğan 2020). A study of metalworkers has also examined income losses and the levels of indebtedness experienced by workers during the pandemic (BİSAM 2020). According to these study findings, 75 per cent of workers have lost income in this process. It is also observed that no less than 47 per cent of the workers who participated in the study were on some form of short-time working allowance.

DİSKAR (2020), in its research into union members in nine different workplaces, also finds that 75 per cent of employees have experienced a loss of income and that, furthermore, the safety measures which have been taken in the workplace are inadequate. It reports additionally that 29 per cent of workers in the workplaces surveyed had been diagnosed with Covid-19 and that 82 per cent considered themselves and their jobs in danger.

From the above, it can be seen that the findings of studies carried out during the pandemic are coincident with one another and that adequate protection is not being provided despite the importance given to economic and social development and to worker health and safety for all workers regardless of country and industrial sector:

> Crisis periods are times when the lives of the working masses are under direct threat. Directing the costs of the crisis to the working class is the reflexive behaviour of the capital class; it doesn't need to think about it, consider measures or develop future scenarios. The capitalist state mechanism operates entirely in accordance with the capital reflex... (Özuğurlu 2020)

Survey of working conditions and protective measures at Inditex during the pandemic

After Covid-19 had been declared a pandemic, almost all countries started to take measures to protect their citizens from its effects. From March, governments generally declared lockdowns in which schools, universities and shopping malls were closed and public meetings and sports events prohibited; only essential workers such as health care providers, food retail workers, public transport workers and postal workers continued to work. However, when Covid-19 cases started slowly to become the 'new normal', governments started opening shopping malls as a result of economic concerns.

We wanted in this work to establish the working conditions of shopping mall employees and, because of multinational companies being among our primary research interests, chose to concentrate on Inditex, a Spanish company that includes a number of brands including Zara, Zara Home, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Stradivarius, Oysho, Massimo Dutti and Uterqüe. According to the company's annual report for 2019, it operates in 172 countries and employs more than 175,000 people. In contrast, there are some 1,985 suppliers who produce goods for Inditex, together contributing a total of 1.4 million workers (Inditex 2020a).

A research survey was therefore conducted among employees at Inditex stores in Turkey, where most of the brand names mentioned above can be found.

Research methodology

Quantitative research techniques were used in the research with an online survey instrument consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. In the conditions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, an online survey method was preferred due to the risks to the health of both workers and researchers. The survey was conducted between 6 June and 15 August 2020.

Survey participants were reached by the snowball method and the survey questionnaire was sent directly to participants' e-mail addresses. Questionnaires were also sent via e-mail to Inditex employees in the author's network on the LinkedIn social media platform. A total of 121 workers working in ten different shopping malls responded to the survey. Survey responses were analysed via the SPSS statistical program which revealed a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.846, indicating that the results are reliable and which endorses their validity.

Nevertheless, a number of potential respondents were clearly put off responding to the survey, either as a result of some of the questions posed, including on gender, or from, as we understand from the returned e-mail responses, many workers not responding as a result of fearing job loss. The conditions of the pandemic and the im-

plementation of short-time working and unpaid leave schemes by political powers in favour of the ruling elites have also made it difficult to carry out field work.

The first part of the study explores the survey findings in relation to the measures taken at mall level, in particular those taken before the closure and after the re-opening of stores/workplaces. The second part focuses on evaluating and analysing data on the working conditions of workers during the pandemic.

Demographic characteristics

According to the survey, workers' gender distribution is very different from other sectors. Inditex workers are, in the main, women: 55 per cent of respondents were women compared to 44 per cent being men and 2 per cent LGBTI. In Turkey, people identifying as LGBTI generally prefer to work in multinationals such as Inditex, H&M, etc. so the questionnaire added an LGBTI option to the question on gender. Inditex and H&M – the leading multinational clothing brands in shopping malls – specifically emphasise their stance against gender discrimination in their publications (Inditex 2020b; H&M 2018).

When we look at the age distribution, we can see that Inditex workers are very young: some 35 per cent are under 25 years old while 80 per cent are under thirty and very few are 35 or older. We concluded that this sector – especially 'fast fashion' – demands young workers. Findings from the literature survey on the use of young workers in shopping malls are also, therefore, confirmed by our study.

Inditex workers generally have a level of education that is above high school: some two-thirds of respondents already had a bachelor's degree while 93 per cent, including undergraduates and those with a master's or associate degree, had university-level education.

We mentioned above the research by Özkaplan *et al*. (2020), highlighting a concentration of shopping mall workers among those who had graduated from high school. It should be mentioned that the generally high level of education among mall workers is the result of another problem – youth unemployment. Young people now have to take their chances in more unskilled and temporary jobs because, while they may have finished university, they are unable to find work in their own professions.

Part-time work is preferred

Working on a part-time basis is particularly preferred in the multinational retail textile trade (fashion clothing). It is possible to say that part-time work has become the rule in shopping malls and especially for multinational brands. Inditex brands are no different in preferring part-time workers to full-time ones and, indeed, 56 per cent of our respondents had part-time status.

The International Labour Organization has identified that temporary and precarious employment in developing countries has become the rule; the general trend emphasises the direction of fixed-term contracts and part-time employment (ILO 2016).

People generally do not work in a shopping mall for a long period

About 72 per cent of respondents had worked at Inditex for fewer than five years, while only 3 per cent of respondents had worked there for ten years or more.

Labour turnover is very high

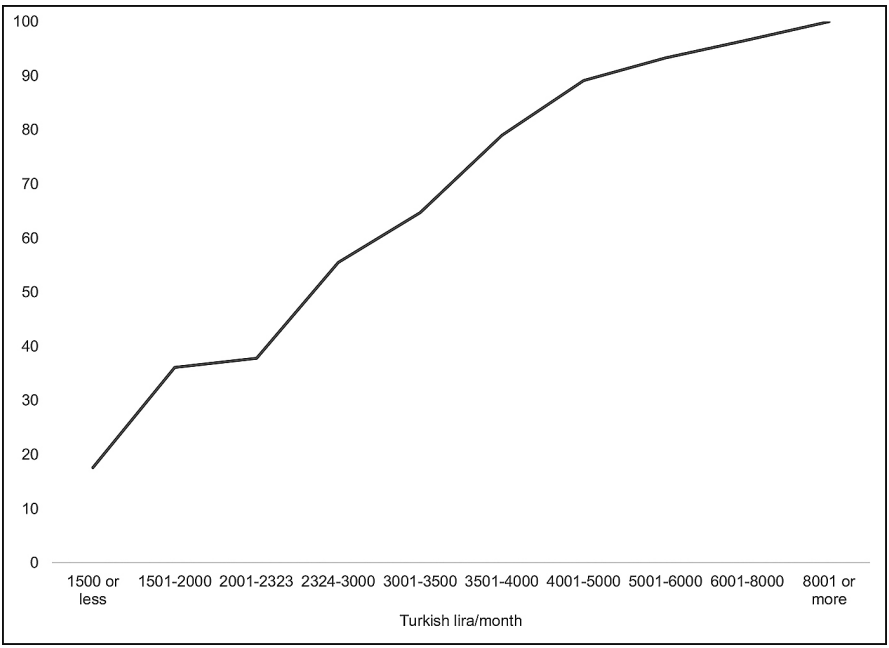
When we take account of the duration of working at Inditex with the duration of working in the sector, we can see that labour turnover is very high. Forty six per cent have worked in the sector for less than five years while fewer than one in ten have experience of ten years or more.

The factors affecting employee turnover are in accordance with the research discussed above. When we look at the reasons why interviewees quit or leave their jobs, these are focused on poor working conditions and not being able to get a full-time, permanent job. It is understood from the opinions expressed that irregularity – and specifically irregularity in the shifts offered, in spite of the hard work people put in – are among the factors affecting labour turnover.

Wages are higher than in other local companies

In Turkey, the official (mandatory) minimum wage is 2324 TL (approximately €250). Some two in five of our respondents work for wages which are below the minimum (see Figure 1). As we established previously, over half of our respondents work part-time, which means that some part-time workers are receiving wages which are higher than the minimum wage.

Figure 1 – Wage curve for survey respondents in Inditex (cumulative per cent)



At the same time, comparing Inditex with other textile retail companies, Inditex wages are slightly higher.

Workers' income has been affected by the duration of Covid-19: over 70 per cent of respondents state that their monthly income had decreased during the pandemic. The causes of decreased income are being put on short-time working or on unpaid leave when the malls were closed – and mostly the former: over 90 per cent respondents state that they had made use of short time working allowance with just 3 per cent on unpaid leave (the remainder had not benefited from any protective arrangements).

Inditex workers are not under the trade union umbrella

Trade union density in Inditex is not high: just 37 per cent of respondents are members of trade unions and, at the same time, there is as yet no collective bargaining agreement covering workers in the company.

The organisation of Inditex workers remains a continuing trade union project.

Protective measures taken by malls

The measures taken by malls in relation to the pandemic are insufficient

Fever is considered one of the most important symptoms of Covid-19. For this reason, temperature is regularly measured at mall entrances: some 87 per cent of our

respondents state that their temperature is regularly measured before they go into a mall.

On the other hand, respondents report that the measures which are found in toilets and at the food courts within malls are insufficient: less than 12 per cent of respondents are satisfied with the measures in place (see Figure 2, which graphically displays responses to a number of survey questions based on a 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' continuum). Furthermore nearly two in three respondents (65 per cent) do not believe that shopping mall managements regularly audit whether or not the rules are obeyed while fewer than one in five believe they do.

Taking into account all the measures put in place to protect employees in shopping malls, no less than 64 per cent of respondents find the measures taken to be inadequate, of which 18 per cent describe them as 'very bad'; just 4 per cent describe them as 'very good' while 32 per cent comment they are 'good but could have been better'. This means that workers in shopping malls are working under conditions that could be described as 'unsafe'.

Occupational health and safety in the workplace

When the government decided to open malls during the pandemic, mall workers were fearful and a large number were unwilling to go to work: half of the respondents in our survey were given no choice but were obliged to come into work (although the other half acknowledge that they were given some say in the matter).

In terms of evaluating the workplace measures undertaken to protect workers' health and safety, we asked workers about which measures had been taken. Like with mall customers, the presence of fever is supposed to be measured in-store by employers or store managements with additional measures required where anyone is found to be running a fever. However, a high percentage of respondents (58 per cent) said that their temperature was not measured while a further 13 per cent said it was measured only sometimes.

The pandemic lockdown meant that shopping malls remained closed for two months. After the decision had been made to re-open them, store cleaning and disinfection were required. It is understood that the cleaning and disinfection of stores was not carried out by shopworkers: just 8 per cent state that cleaning and disinfection was done by them the day they started back while 15 per cent said it was done professionally by specialist cleaners on that day.

Occupational health and safety training is very important and indeed mandatory. In the time of the pandemic, such training is both vital and crucial. However, one in four workers have received no health and safety training on the outbreak of the pandemic while a further 10 per cent say that such training was only given once they were back at work.

Risk assessment and analysis is even more important during a pandemic than in normal times. However, 22 per cent of respondents state that no risk assessment and analysis had ever been made in respect of Covid-19 while 61 per cent had no idea whether such assessments had been made. This means that workers are operating without knowing the dangers and risks applying to their work.

Being involved in the decision-making process is important for industrial democracy and social dialogue. During the pandemic, decisions about health and safety measures ought to be made in conjunction with workers. However, our respondents point out that, when it came to such decisions, they had been simply excluded: two in three workers state that they had not been consulted on any coronavirus measures being taken in their own workplace.

Cleaning and ventilation of malls as well as stores is vital in the pandemic since it is known that poor cleaning and ventilation assist the spreading of the virus. Figure 2 reports that just over half our respondents disagree that adequate cleaning and ventilation was provided in their stores; on the other hand, only 28 per cent are satisfied with the level of cleaning and ventilation.

Sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) has been supplied

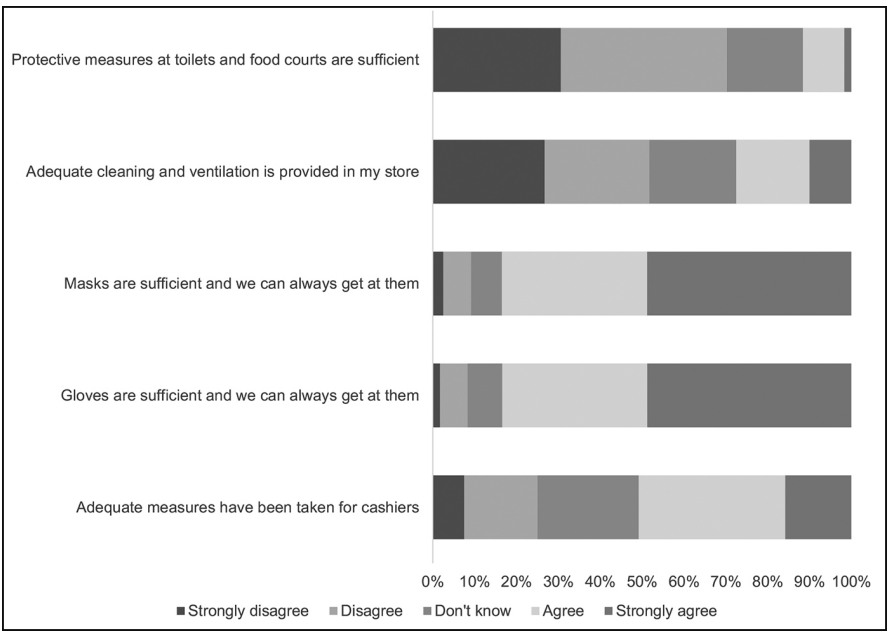
It is clear that PPE – masks, sanitiser and gloves – has been supplied by the employer in sufficient quantities (Figure 2). Despite this positive result, however, training on the use of PPE has not been given to all workers, of whom 30 per cent have had no training on the PPE which had been distributed in their workplace.

Avoiding crowds and ensuring physical distance is important in the prevention of the spread of Covid-19. The crowded area of stores is generally at the cash desks and, as a result, cashiers and the cash desk area ought to be protected with equipment such as shields or visors and plexiglass screens.

Some 87 per cent of respondents state that shields or visors had been installed so as to allow cashiers to keep their distance from customers; but six per cent point out that there was no shields or visors for cashiers at all while a further seven per cent reported that they were not in place for all cashiers. According to 71 per cent of respondents, protective screens had been provided but this left 29 per cent reporting that screens were either not in place at all or had not been provided at all desks (and overwhelmingly the former).

Not all respondents evaluated positively the general preventative measures which had been taken in respect of cashiers and cask desks in their stores; only just over one-half say that adequate measures had been taken while one in four disagree (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Respondents' level of agreement with a variety of statements on in-store (or in-mall) safety



Customers and in-store measures

One measure to prevent overcrowding in stores is to place warning signs at store entrances. Some 61 per cent of respondents say that adequate precautions had been taken in this respect although 23 per cent disagree (while 16 per cent say they had no idea).

In addition to hanging warning signs at store entrances, avoiding in-store crowding is helped by observing the rule that there should be one person per every eight square metres of floor space. When we asked workers, 64 per cent say that this rule was observed although 21 per cent say directly that it was not. This means that one in five respondents answered negatively and that the measures taken had, therefore, been inadequate.

Customers do not observe the rules in stores. We asked workers which rules were not observed by customers, allowing them to make multiple selections. For the most part (84 per cent), respondents feel that customers do not comply with social distance rules while 74 per cent report that wearing a mask is not always observed. Just 11 per cent of respondents state that customers do observe the rules in place.

People who do not observe the rules must be warned and this is, mostly, the case although 86 per cent of respondents report that customers were warned by other workers, compared to small percentages reporting that this is a responsibility of store

managers or security staff. This is therefore a new type of duty for workers in the 'new normal'.

According to our findings, customers in the majority of cases do not behave properly towards workers: just over one-half of our respondents express the opinion that customers behaved 'badly' or 'very badly' towards workers compared to just under one-half reporting that they behaved 'well' or 'very well'.

We asked respondents to evaluate all the measures taken at stores to protect employees against Covid-19 transmission after the opening of their workplace. We find that only a minority assess the measures positively with 52 per cent assessing them as 'poor' (41 per cent) or 'very poor' (11 per cent).

Working conditions

It is known that, after the outbreak of the pandemic, online shopping has become preferred to the physical version. We wanted to find out how working conditions had been affected during the pandemic once shops had been re-opened compared to the position beforehand.

First, we investigated whether there had been a change in workload. In contrast to the low customer numbers in stores, we can see that the workload of employees has increased compared to before the pandemic. Due to workers being put on unpaid leave or short-time working, stores continue to operate with insufficient numbers of staff. Some 69 per cent of respondents agree that their workload has been higher after the re-opening of stores, of whom 40 per cent strongly agree (Figure 3). At the same time, over one in five survey participants (22 per cent) disagree that breaks are insufficient or that they are able regularly to take their breaks.

In the pandemic, all shopworkers are working in a risky and dangerous environment. It is known that some employers provide extra pay or bonuses to their workers for working during dangerous times. We wanted therefore to find out whether our respondents had seen anything like 'danger money', or risk pay. The largest number – 15 per cent – of respondents state that they had been on short-time work while receiving full pay; and four per cent indicate they had been given additional paid leave. Nevertheless, 79 per cent of respondents had not received any additional pay or leave.

Shopping malls as a source of infection

In this survey, it was very important to understand the number of in-store Covid-19 cases: in everyday life, thousands of customers visit a store for shopping which means that stores occupy a highly convenient location for an outbreak of coronavirus infection: from customer to worker; from worker to customer; from customer to customer; and from worker to worker.

However, just one employee in our sample of 121 respondents had been diagnosed with Covid-19 and received treatment.

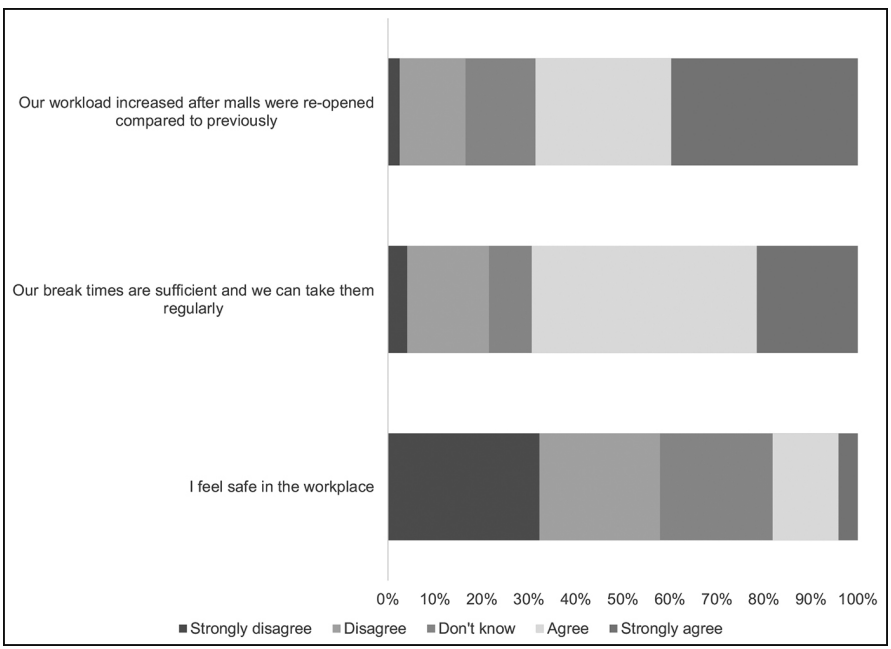
Although the rate of infection among our survey respondents is very low, their witness of coronavirus in their workplaces is rather high: 17 per cent of respondents had at least one of their work colleagues who had been diagnosed with Covid-19.

This is a very important finding since it means that at least 17 per cent of employees may have been contaminated with Covid-19 by their colleagues within the workplace.

All workers are afraid of catching Covid-19 as a result of being at work. The biggest source of personal fear about transmission of the virus (when respondents were asked to name just one) are customers (66 per cent) or public transportation (26 per cent) while colleagues or other employees at the mall rank lowly (just 4 per cent in each case).

When respondents were asked to evaluate safety measures on the whole (Figure 3), 58 per cent disagree that they feel safe at work while just 18 per cent are in agreement.

Figure 3 – Respondents' level of agreement with a series of statements on working conditions



Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that multinationals have been found to be incompetent in taking and overseeing measures in relation to workers' safety during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore it is possible to state that this inadequacy has contributed to the spread of the pandemic: employees have had to work in unsafe conditions both in malls and in stores; and, although customer flow has decreased, workloads have increased as a result of measures related to the pandemic being taken and controlled in-

store by employees. In other words, workers are subject to more intensive work and are unable to rest adequately.

Inditex has benefited from the government's pandemic packages for employers. However, since these packages were not in favour of workers, it is workers who have been the more greatly affected by the pandemic. Both the short-time working allowance and the practice of unpaid leave have had a negative impact on workers' incomes. Any loss in the income of workers, who have to live off their labour, deeply affects the entirety of their living conditions. That those who have experienced a loss of income during the pandemic numbers so highly reflects the burden of the pandemic falling on the working class.

As a result, our survey has found that the multinational company Inditex is not sufficiently supportive of its employees economically and has not been able adequately to protect them against the spread of the pandemic. Capital has made a choice here in terms of costs and occupational health which stems from its class preference, choosing the way of saving costs and maintaining capital accumulation rather than the health of workers. Workers are also trapped in exercising their decision to come to work between catching the virus and poverty. Despite their fears of becoming sick, workers have chosen – entirely understandably – to avoid near-poverty: the task for trade unions in representing workers continues to be to make that decision both easier and less costly.

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