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Benefit claims soar, unemployment creeps up, jobs and pay fall

Some 856,500 people applied for Universal Credit in April, increasing the UK overall claimant count by 69% in one month alone, and driving the total number claiming unemployment benefits to 2.1 million, Office of National Statistics (ONS) figures revealed on Tuesday.

The rise in claimants was the biggest monthly increase since comparable records began in the early 1970s. Meanwhile annual wage growth slowed to 1.5% in March, the lowest in almost six years, and the number of job vacancies fell by nearly a quarter to 637,000 in the three months to April.

In real terms, annual earnings growth was estimated to be 0.7% in total pay and 1.0% in regular pay, in the three months to March 2020, both down from a recent peak of 2.0% in the three months to June 2019.

According to the ONS, UK unemployment rose by 50,000 to 1.35 million in the three months to March. The unemployment rate was estimated at 3.9%, slightly lower than the previous quarter - however these figures only take in the first week of lockdown, so are likely to worsen in line with the economic damage caused by the coronavirus

pandemic. PAYE figures also show that the number of employees on company payrolls dropped by 450,000 at the start of April.

The UK employment rate in the three months to March 2020 was estimated at a joint-record high of 76.6%, 0.6 percentage points higher than a year earlier and 0.2 percentage points up on the previous quarter.

There is some good news in that the dramatic surge in unemployment could have been catastrophically worse without the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme (furloughing), which, in its early stages, is estimated to have protected around 8m jobs. However, the scheme, although extended to October (*see last issue*) is a temporary response to the pandemic crisis.

Commenting on the ONS figures, TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "These figures are alarming - but unsurprising. It's clear we need a solid economic plan for recovery. Extending the job retention scheme was the right first step.

"Now we need a job guarantee scheme to stop long-term unemployment, and a plan that puts full employment on decent wages and fair terms at its heart," she concluded.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/averageweeklyearningsearn01>
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/may2020>
<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/we-need-solid-economic-plan-recovery-says-tuc>

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Inflation drops to four year low

Inflation in Britain virtually halved in April, falling to a four year low of 0.8%, according to the latest figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). The Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rate had been 1.5% in March, down from 1.7% in February.

The ONS estimates that the slump in inflation is largely explained by falling oil prices caused by the global pandemic, and by the cap on gas and electricity prices introduced by regulator Ofgem on 1 April. Clothing prices also continued their recent drop, reflecting the closure of retail outlets. There have been some increases in the prices of long-life foods, as well as recreation and hobby items such as toys, games and knitting wool, probably reflecting life in lockdown.

The ONS stated that:

- the CPI 12-month rate was 0.8% in April 2020, down from 1.5% in March. Similarly, the CPI including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH) 12-month rate was 0.9% in April, down from 1.5%;
- the largest contribution to the CPIH 12-month inflation rate in April came from recreation and culture (0.31 percentage points);
- falling energy and fuel pump prices resulted in the largest downward contributions to the change in the CPIH 12-month inflation rate between March and April 2020; and
- rising prices for recreational goods resulted in a partially offsetting upward contribution to change.

A similar picture emerged in the European Union (EU), according to figures from Eurostat, its statistical office, released, like the ONS's, on Wednesday of this week. According to Eurostat, EU annual inflation was 0.7% in April, down from 1.2% in March. A year earlier, the rate was 1.9%

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/consumerpriceinflation/april2020>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/coronavirusandtheeffectsonukprices/2020-05-06#annex-b-list-of-unavailable-items>

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10294852/2-20052020-AP-EN.pdf/4d69f01b-fe9a-c248-2627-cc2059ca2f31>

NHS workers' coalition sets plan for return

A 17-strong coalition of unions representing over a million NHS workers has laid down a blueprint

for the health service's safe return to carrying out work suspended during the lockdown.

Putting safety first, fast and accessible testing, and an ample supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) - especially as other workplaces open and employers look for it for their own workers - are among the nine demands set out by the unions.

As out-patient clinics and operations resume, the blueprint states, the two-metre rule must be retained, certain staff must be able to continue working from home, and personnel must be regularly redeployed from high-risk areas to ones under less pressure.

The unions also called on the government to ensure staff working through the pandemic get proper overtime. They want NHS employers to recognise the regard in which healthcare workers are held by the UK public when it comes to pay talks later this year. The unions say that there can be no return to pay freezes and austerity.

UNISON head of health Sara Gorton, who also chairs the NHS group of unions, said: "As hospitals get busier, and clinics and other services begin to re-open, the safety of staff and patients is paramount. But this can't happen without plentiful and constant PPE supplies.

"Tackling Covid has been a huge challenge, but this next phase will be a crucial test too. This nine-point plan will enable senior NHS managers to work with staff and unions to restart safely many of the services that had to shut up shop when the pandemic hit. Acting on the plan could prevent a second wave of infection."

The unions that have joined to promote the blueprint are the: British Association of Occupational Therapists, British Dental Association, British Dietetic Association, British Medical Association, British Orthoptists Society, Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, College of Podiatry, Federation of Clinical Scientists, GMB, HCSA - the hospital doctors' union, Managers in Partnership, Prison Officers Association, Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of Nursing, Society of Radiographers, UNISON and Unite.

- Doctors' union the BMA, which has publicly backed teaching unions resisting a reopening of schools from 1 June, has reported that thousands of its members have no confidence in being able to manage patient demand in the coming weeks.

<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/26086.pdf>

<https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/thousands-of-doctors-have-little-or-no-confidence-in-the-nhs-ability-to-provide-safe-patient-care>

Third of all employed are key workers

The ONS has provided data that gives a picture of the number of people employed in 2019 in key worker roles, based on the government's recent (14 May 2020) criteria for critical workers who can access schools.

It found that:

- in 2019, 10.6 million of those employed (33% of the total workforce) were in key worker occupations and industries;
- the largest group of those in key worker occupations worked in health and social care (31%);
- 15% of key workers were at moderate risk from Covid-19 because of a health condition;
- 31% of key workers have children aged between 5 and 15 years; 16% have children aged 4 or under;
- of all households with dependent children (under 16 years), 6% were key workers and lone parents; 9% were households where both members of the couple were key workers; and
- 14% of key workers reported working from home at least one day in the past week in 2019.

The ONS has also produced statistics on Covid's social effects on people, households and communities. Its findings included that:

- during the period 24 April to 3 May 2020, 8 in 10 adults (80%) in Great Britain continued to say they had either not left their home or only left for the permitted reasons in the past seven days;
- most people think that we will be united and kind following our recovery from the coronavirus pandemic (57% and 67% respectively), but only 22% thought we would be an equal society; and
- expectations for when life will return to normal are getting longer: 46% of adults now think it will be more than six months, compared with 33% after the first week of lockdown.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/coronavirusandkeyworkersintheuk/2020-05-15>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain14may2020>

Union support for mental health week

Unions have voiced support for Mental Health Awareness Week, saying that it is more relevant than

ever in a time of lockdown and worries about job losses and illness. The week, which is hosted by the Mental Health Foundation, runs from 18 to 24 May.

Postal workers' union the CWU has produced a toolkit to help members get behind the event, including staging two online events.

Shopworkers' union Usdaw highlighted its work with fellow unions Community, GMB, Prospect and Unite, and the Chemical Industries Association (CIA). Usdaw recommends the CIA's interactive mental health and wellbeing indicator tool and signpost guide (*available via the link below*).

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns/mental-health-awareness-week>
<http://www.usdaw.org.uk/About-Us/News/2020/May/Employers-and-trade-unions-in-key-manufacturing-se>

TSSA wants action after concourse incident death

Transport union TSSA has laid out a set of demands to train operator Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) after consulting workmates of Betty Mujinga, a 47-year old worker at Victoria Station who died from coronavirus.

Two weeks before her death Mujinga and a colleague were allegedly spat at by a customer on the station concourse. It has been asserted that she then asked her supervisor to report the incident to police, but that she (the supervisor) failed to do so - it took the TSSA to call for an investigation.

The TSSA's demands are:

- feedback and concerns from staff must be taken seriously and risk assessments must not be signed off until health and safety reps, having had sufficient time to share with colleagues, are satisfied measures have been put in place to mitigate the risks as much as is reasonable;
- to keep staff working in the ticket office with social distancing measures and not expose members to further risk by insisting they work on the concourse;
- staff must at all times be kept at least two metres apart from each other and/or passengers. If this is not possible, for example when working in a crowded concourse, appropriate protection such as visors must be provided;
- staff must not be asked to clean ticket machines without PPE and certified cleaning products;
- all those with underlying medical conditions to be stood down immediately;

- health surveillance procedures to be put in place to identify sick, asymptomatic and vulnerable workers previously unknown;
- an investigation into the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BME frontline workers/workers of colour; and
- a full investigation into any assault of the staff, co-operating with any criminal investigation and a full internal investigation into the way this was handled by management.

In a separate move, train drivers' union Aslef has advised its members of their right to refuse to work if they might be in danger.

Aslef organiser on the London Underground, Finn Brennan, said: "Aslef does not believe that London Underground has fulfilled the requirements for genuine consultation with staff and this trade union. Consequently, we have advised our members of their statutory right to refuse to work in circumstances where they are at risk of serious and imminent danger."

<https://www.tssa.org.uk/en/whats-new/news/index.cfm/belly-mujinga-tssa-demands-for-staff-safety>
https://www.aslef.org.uk/article.php?group_id=7138

Deaths disparity inquiry call

The Unite union has called for a public inquiry into why workers in low paid jobs face a greater risk of dying from Covid-19 than those in higher paid professions.

Recent ONS statistics showed that of Covid-related deaths in people of working age in England and Wales registered up to 20 April 2020, nearly two-thirds were among men. Men working in the lowest skilled occupations had the highest rate of death, with 21.4 deaths per 100,000 males (225 deaths); those working as security guards had one of the highest rates, with 45.7 deaths per 100,000 (63 deaths).

Men and women working in social care (care workers and home carers) both had significantly raised rates of death involving coronavirus, with rates of 23.4 deaths per 100,000 males (45 deaths) and 9.6 deaths per 100,000 females (86 deaths).

Healthcare workers, including doctors and nurses, were not found to have higher rates of death involving Covid-19 when compared with the rate among those whose death involved Covid-19 of the same

age and sex in the general population.

Among men, a number of other specific occupations were found to have raised rates of death, including: taxi drivers and chauffeurs (36.4 deaths per 100,000); bus and coach drivers (26.4 deaths per 100,000); chefs (35.9 deaths per 100,000); and sales and retail assistants (19.8 deaths per 100,000).

Unite assistant general secretary Diana Holland said: "While lessons need to be learned for the future, it is immediately imperative that all workplaces examine these figures and urgently revisit how more effective measures can be taken to protect workers who have remained in work or who are returning to the workplace."

John Phillips, acting GMB general secretary, commented: "These figures are horrifying. If you are low paid and working through the COVID19 crisis you are more likely to die - that's how stark these figures are."

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/whichoccupationshavethehighestpotentialexposuretothecoronaviruscovid19>
<https://unitetheunion.org/news-events/news/2020/may/inquiry-needed-as-low-paid-workers-at-greatest-risk-of-covid-19-deaths>
<https://www.gmb.org.uk/news/ons-covid-19-death-figures-horrifying>

CIPD: one fifth plan redundancies

More than a fifth of employers polled are planning to make redundancies, according to the latest Labour Market Outlook survey from the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) and Adecco Group.

The report found that employment intentions have "declined significantly over the past three months". When asked, almost half (49%) said they will maintain total staff levels.

Nineteen % said that they will increase staff levels, while just over a fifth (22%) said the intention is to decrease staff levels. This is an increase of 11% over the winter 2019/20 survey.

The number of employers planning to hire more staff has fallen to its lowest level since the surveys began in 2005. Just 40% plan to increase numbers in the three months to July 2020.

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/work/trends/labour-market-outlook>