



## Deindustrialisation, Deregulation, and Division: The Case of Shirebrook and Sports Direct

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Deindustrialisation has ravaged areas of the English North and Midlands, areas that are also some of the hardest hit by successive governments' programs of austerity since 2008. A recent study claimed that the hollowing out of industry in these areas and its replacement with low paid, insecure work enabled by a severely deregulated labour market has meant that many people have been redirected out of the labour market and onto incapacity benefits. Those who employed must often work in chronically low-wage jobs with their meagre earnings topped up by state-funded tax credits. This transformation of the labour market has been largely overlooked by press and politicians alike, who instead problematically blame a lack of work ethic and migration affecting work chances and lowering wages.

Such rhetoric pits working-class groups against one another rather than challenging the root cause: the quality of employment and the wider political environment. Little wonder, then, that these areas were at the centre of debates about alleged 'white working-class' victims of uncontrolled immigration in the lead up to the referendum on Britain's

membership of the European Union. One such place is, Shirebrook in Derbyshire, which has received migrant workers from Eastern Europe and where racial tension has been stirred up by the tabloid press.

Shirebrook was a small agricultural settlement until the shafts of Shirebrook Colliery were sunk in 1896, transforming the village almost overnight. It grew from around 600 people to 11,000 by 1911, and the population remains about the same to this day. The colliery company dominated the town, providing many of the facilities needed in the growing community, including a hotel, shops, and a miners' welfare institute; amenities, including water and electricity; and leisure activities such as allotment gardens, colliery cricket and football clubs, and a brass band.

When it closed in 1993, the colliery still dominated the town's economy, providing the vast majority of male employment, a story repeated across the region. Closure was devastating for Shirebrook, and the community suffered from the usual litany of deindustrial problems, including concentrated joblessness, declining levels of amenities, physical isolation, severe health problems, petty crime, and substance abuse. By 2001, Shirebrook was identified as one of the most deprived towns in England, qualifying it for investment from the government's Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to facilitate the redevelopment of the former colliery site. This was a mixed blessing, however, because as part of this regeneration Sports Direct, a sports-goods retailer, acquired land and built its headquarters and warehouse on the site in 2005. Sports Direct is now the largest employer in Shirebrook, with over 3000 people working there.



Unions say working conditions at the site seem "Dickensian"

Sports Direct's employment practices have become a poster child for much that is wrong with contemporary work in the UK, with the company facing intense scrutiny from the Unite trade union and the Guardian newspaper, leading to a Parliamentary Select Committee investigation. Of the staff employed at the Shirebrook headquarters, only 200 are directly

employed by Sports Direct with permanent contracts, leaving 3000 employed through employment agencies. Workers must agree to highly restrictive conditions, such as long periods where no work is available and the obligation to accept work when it is available. Workers are guaranteed just 336 hours per year, equating to a little more than 8 weeks' work. Agency workers are effectively on zero-hour contracts for the rest of the year, with no guaranteed income, both Sports Direct and the employment agencies legitimise this practice as offering both the worker and the client 'flexibility'. This flexibility only works in one direction. The agencies gain flexibility by contracts that don't obligate them to offer any assignments beyond the 336 hours, but if workers refuse any assignments offered to them, they can be sacked. This leaves the agency workers in a precarious position, which is compounded by the fact that most are Polish migrants who have limited networks of support available to them.

Sports Direct also uses a 'six strikes and you're out policy', where agency workers could be disciplined for minor offences, such as excessive toilet breaks, chatting, or being off work because of illness. Workers had no chance to defend themselves if they have been wrongly accused of a misdemeanour because challenging supervisors' decisions ran the risk of reducing their hours as a punishment. So the employer has yet more power over the agency workers, enabling them to discipline or dismiss workers and control how many hours they work. The investigation also uncovered accusations of sexual harassment, dubious health and safety records, and stringent security measures that required employees to spend excessive amounts of time at work - unpaid — to be searched after clocking-out and before they were allowed to leave. As a result, they earned less than minimum wage.

Sports Direct has revised its employment practices since the Parliamentary Select Committee investigation, stopping zero hour contracts, ending the six strikes policy, and also relaxed security measures. This is a step in the right direction, but is some way from a satisfactory outcome. The warehouse workers are still employed by agencies and remain on the same overly-constraining contracts. Most of the workers are migrant labour, who are overrepresented in this type of poor quality work, characterised by low wages, unpredictable hours, and easily disposable personnel.

Regrettably, there appears to be little solidarity between the migrant workers at Sports Direct and the more established British residents of Shirebrook. Despite sharing similarly precarious positions in the deregulated and deindustrialised neoliberal economy, the Polish workers have frequently found themselves being blamed for the issues faced by all the residents of Shirebrook, a view propagated by the right-wing tabloid press. It would seem that the category 'white working-class' does not stretch to the white working-class Polish migrant workers at Sports Direct.

This story is typical of many former industrial towns, in the UK and beyond. It offers a object lesson in the consequences of replacing industry with precarious work, especially for workers and their communities. The conditions in Shirebrook and similar communities will only be effectively challenges when ‘the working class’ includes people of all backgrounds.

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