Open letter to the following Board Chairs:

Mr Peter Ernst, Aldi
Mr Roger Burnley, Asda
Mr Allan Leighton, The Co-operative
Sir Malcolm Walker, Iceland
Mr Dieter Schwarz, Lidl
Mr Archie Norman, Marks & Spencer
Mr Andrew Thomas Higginson, Morrisons
Mr Martin Scicluna, Sainsbury’s
Mr John Allan, Tesco
Ms Sharon White, Waitrose/John Lewis Partnership

Tuesday 24th March 2020

Dear Chairperson,

RE: Steps to Respect the Human Rights of Workers in Light of the COVID-19 Crisis

The current circumstance facing shop workers is of world-wide concern and affects large and small establishments. We recognise that this is a challenging time for retail, with many competing priorities.

We hope, however, that you consider the safety of your own workers to be of paramount consideration. Reports we have received from workers from a selection of UK supermarkets indicate that whilst the Government has now designated them as “key workers,” many among them do not feel they are treated as such in practice. Workers, often on relatively modest pay, have not been afforded basic protections (such as disposable gloves and facial masks) now routinely deployed in other frontline professions. They are expected to continue to work at the risk to their own health, and the risk to their families increases on a daily basis.

Shop workers, often not represented by trade unions or other formal processes, have reported feeling “disloyal” raising these concerns at a time when management is under stress and trying to pull together and do the right thing. However, as business leaders, you have a responsibility to respect these workplace rights through adequate due diligence, mitigation, and prevention, even before staff themselves need to raise concern.

The following measures have been instigated by supermarkets in other countries but are not widely found in the UK at the moment. Does your supermarket already routinely apply the following steps or is it planning to do so this week?

• Appointing a designated member of the management team in every store with the clear responsibility for lowering COVID-19 related risk for customers and staff?

• Enforcing social distancing at checkouts and controlling the numbers of customers in store at any given time?
• Making disposable gloves and hand-sanitiser available for staff who do not have regular access to soap and water? For example, checkout staff only have short breaks every 4 hours – during which time they might serve hundreds of customers. Reports suggest that some staff have had to bring in their own protective items or have not been allowed to wear facial protection.

• Investigating the viability of transparent screens and other steps to protect checkout staff from potentially infected customers, including the possibility of checking the temperature of customers and staff before entering?

• Are there signs to ask customers to respect the dignity of staff and each other in relation to social-distancing, polite behaviour, and purchasing limits to end hoarding?

Our society is significantly dependent on the hard work and commitment of professions such as supermarket workers. At such a moment, their rights must be protected and employers have duty of care obligations. We hope that your company will send a clear expectation, both publicly and down to store-level, that respecting the human rights of everyone – in particular staff – matters as we work together to overcome this crisis.

The Institute for Human Rights and Business is an independent non-profit organisation with consultative status at the United Nations and gives free and impartial advice to governments, business, civil society, and trade unions around the world. Our Leadership Group for Responsible Recruitment (www.employerpays.org) is one example of how collective action can help protect some of the most vulnerable workers in global supply chains.

We welcome the steps some UK supermarkets have announced today to better protect both staff and customers, but this is still not uniformly applied by all. We welcome your response to this letter.

Yours sincerely

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