

Down with excessive pricing!!

By John Appolis

On Saturday, 18 April 2020, I bought surgical face masks, costing R19.95 each, from Dis-Chem in Park Meadows. Then five days later on 23rd April I bought the same surgical face masks at Dis-Chem, but this time from the Eastgate Branch. This time, however, it costs R14.95 each. I mentioned the price difference to the cashier and she replied: "No here we only charge R14.95". It is a price difference of a hefty 26%. I thought ok, maybe some capitalists are prepared to sacrifice some of their profits for the good of the public.

Not to be. On my way home I heard on the car radio rather that the Competition Commission is charging Dis-Chem for inflating the prices of surgical face masks. It was not because of self-sacrifice that Dis-Chem reduced the mask-price by 26% but rather the actions of the Commissioners of the Competition Commission compelling it to do so.

More scandalous, the investigations of the Competition Commission revealed that Dis-Chem has been charging excessive prices on dust and surgical masks from February already. The investigations show that average price increases between February and March on these products ranged between 43% and 261%!!

Last year in November 2019 Dis-Chem reported a 39% drop in their interim profit and clearly now the company wants to use the pandemic to make up for lost profit and to enrich its shareholders. This conduct of Dis-Chem is typical of the behaviour of capital in the country. For them the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to make super-profits. Prices of basic stuff have also exponentially increased.

We need to salute the progressive Commissioners of the Competition Commission for having the political will and determination to tackle the excessive greed of Dis-Chem. It is by time that we see such willingness coming from the ranks of the state to stop this naked greed in its tracks. The same cannot, however, be said about the Presidency, his Cabinet and Ministers. Rather what we have witnessed is their abject subservience to the interests of capital. Since the start of the pandemic, these arms of the South African State have been falling over backwards to serve the masters of wealth, granting them more freedom to co-ordinate actions among themselves, to control markets and to create monopolies.

To put a further brake on this excessive profiteering and to restrict the unfettered freedom of capital, workers of Dis-Chem should take their cue from the Competition Commission. Workers of Dis-Chem must form Workers' Price Control Committees in every single branch of the company. These Dis-Chem Workers' Price Control Committees must see it as their public duty to monitor the price movements of every single product of Dis-Chem. Any excessive pricing must be opposed and exposed and here the Workers' Price Control Committees should work closely with the progressives in the Competition Commission.

Dis-Chem Workers' Price Control Committees should go further and identify essential products that are necessary to defeat COVID-19 and demand that the prices of these necessary products be reduced. What the workers of Dis-Chem ought to realise is that they will have public support for this struggle to secure quality, affordable health and medical products!!

Salute the Progressives in the Competition Commission!!

Forward to Dis-Chem Workers' Price Control Committees!!

This Opinion Piece was written on 24 April 2020 by John Appolis, who is the General Secretary of the General Industrial Workers of South Africa.

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