

Join me and end the iniquity of zero-hours contracts

Julian Richer
Sunday May 15 2022, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

W

hat was a wealthy capitalist doing giving a speech at Congress

House, the TUC's headquarters in London? The mood was sober. The audience were looking me up and down rather apprehensively. Luckily, I had brought some friends along for moral support.

It was January 13, 2020, and I was there to talk about what I saw as a scourge on society. I was firmly on their side. By the end of my nine-minute talk, I felt I had won the audience over — admittedly by trying a little humour, not always easy when discussing a matter of gravity for many. But I was preaching to the converted, after all.

I was talking about zero-hours contracts.

These ghastly things are occasionally harmless; if a student works a few irregular hours a week in a bar, they are absolutely fine — as long as these people have other income to live on (I am not talking about short-term contracts for pop festivals, summer jobs etc, because here everyone knows where they stand). But it is estimated that a majority of 900,000 zero-hours contract workers don't have that luxury. They are mostly women and have had these contracts imposed on them, or felt forced to sign them when alternative work was not available. This is no different to dockers standing on the quayside waiting for bosses to come along in their trucks to offer them a day's work if they were lucky. If they weren't

picked, they went hungry. That was 100 years ago — and little has changed. I feel for these people.

Research has found that workers on zero-hours contracts are at greater risk of psychological distress and being unhappy than those in full-time jobs. Do we really want stressed, demotivated and disgruntled staff?

But they're lucky to have jobs, aren't they? What's all the fuss about?

Fine. But try renting a flat when you can't provide evidence of regular income. Even decent, ethical landlords won't touch you with a bargepole.

The outcome is that some of our hardest-working and most wonderful carers, many of whom don't even earn the real living wage, literally end up living on the breadline and in debt. Some have to sleep in their cars.

Is this the society we want? Where are these workers supposed to live? Social housing stock is like gold dust, with 8 million Britons living in overcrowded, unaffordable and unsuitable conditions (according to the Church of England's independent housing commission).

Another example: a single mum, trying to juggle her busy life and keen to work, arranges childcare. She goes to work but after a couple of hours the boss says: "Sorry, love, it's quiet today — I'm going to send you home early." What the hell?! She has earned no money and yet still has childcare costs to pay. This is just not fair.

The imbalance of power between bosses and workers is always there. In my opinion, the latter group's vulnerability is multiplied many times over by zero-hours contracts. If bullying or harassment is occurring in a workplace, it is going to be much harder for those not on permanent contracts to speak out about any mistreatment. They just won't get any hours the next week.

Annoyingly, when universal credit recipients are trying to work with the uncertainty of a zero-hours contract, this makes it doubly difficult, with their income changing all the time.

How come only a quarter of countries in the EU even allow the damn things? They are a great source of poverty and misery. We should be ashamed.

So, if you are an employer using zero-hours contracts, please consider binning them. If you are not ready to do that, or your business is a special case and really needs them (such as an events company working only on sporadic dates), please switch to a “fairer hours” contract that gives two weeks’ notice of shifts — with the worker being paid if they are cancelled within that period.

I promise this will be to your benefit. Your staff will feel happier and more secure. They will be less stressed, less likely to leave you or not show up for shifts, and be more loyal. Trust me.

Postscript: the Daily Telegraph kindly sent along a journalist to cover my speech. Supposedly, this was the first visit by a Telegraph staffer to Congress House in living memory. They dutifully published a piece about my rallying call, with a nice photo of TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady smiling behind me while I was holding forth. I was there to launch the Zero Hours Justice campaign, which I had set up to try and change this abhorrent practice.