

The 'one-sided' nature of zero-hours contracts – TUC

2 years ago



Zero-hour contracts (ZHC) became more common in the UK during the early 2000s. Of course, casual working arrangements have been around for decades, but the use of zero-hour contracts has increased significantly in recent years.

A recent poll by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has revealed some interesting facts and insights into the feelings of workers on ZHC, including the fact that 75% of people on such contracts have experienced financial difficulty due to lack of work and 84% want regular hours.

FM Director asked Tim Sharp, TUC's Senior Employment Rights Officer, what he thought about the results of the survey.

"It confirms what workers have been telling us for a while, which is that zero-hours contracts and similar arrangements are not a form of flexible working for workers," Tim said.

"They offer a form of one-sided flexibility that's more in favour of the employer. A worker on a zero-hours contract is often worried about whether they're going to get a shift tomorrow or next week, and therefore how they're going to pay the bills. They're also often worried about turning down shifts and subsequently struggle to cover any care responsibilities they have, or to have any sort of private life because as soon as the shift is offered, they feel they have to accept it or risk not being offered any more shifts in the future." Tim added.

Financial pressures

The poll reveals that many zero-hours workers are struggling financially due to being underemployed.

Three-quarters (75%) of those polled say they have experienced difficulty meeting living expenses due to not being offered enough hours.

This is backed up by other findings from the poll which show that:

- Two-thirds of (66%) of people employed on ZHC are seeking extra work.
- Well over half (58%) of zero-hours workers' requests for more hours are being refused by employers.

One-way flexibility

As Tim highlights, ZHC are very one-sided. Backing this up further, the survey shows that:

- Over half of ZHC workers (52%) have had shifts cancelled at less than 24 hours' notice.
- Two-thirds (66%) of ZHC workers say they received no compensation for cancelled shifts - with just 1 in 20 (5%) fully compensated.
- Over three-quarters (76%) say they felt they had to work despite feeling unwell.

Work-life balance

The poll also reveals how many ZHC workers have struggled to balance caring responsibilities and family commitments with their work. 50% of those questioned say they have had trouble managing childcare with their work, rising to 67% for mothers. In addition, 76% say they have missed out on a planned family or social event due to needing to work.

The poll shows that mums (35%) and carers (38%) on ZHCs are more likely than those not on ZHCs (22% and 20% respectively) to often find it hard to manage care alongside their work - putting paid to the idea that ZHCs are the best way to help working parents and carers balance paid work and unpaid caring commitments.

The majority (80%) of students on zero-hours contracts also reported that they had experienced difficulties managing studying and education alongside their work.

The poll further reveals that even amongst the minority of zero-hours contract workers who report working in this way because of their need for flexibility (for care or for study) - 6 in 10 (61%) - would prefer a contract with guaranteed shifts (compared to less than a quarter, 23% of this group for whom this arrangement would not be preferable).

Making work pay

The TUC says the findings highlight the importance of the government's forthcoming Employment Rights Bill that will ban the use of zero-hours contracts and other exploitative practices.

Tim says: "The incoming government has promised to ban exploitative zeros contracts, and it's talked about ensuring that workers have the right to a contract that reflects their normal hours of work and based on a 12-week reference period."

Analysis published by the union body in June revealed that 4.1 million people in the UK were currently employed in low-paid and insecure work – including around 1 million workers on zero-hours contracts.

Separate TUC [polling](#) published in July revealed that the vast majority (67%) of voters in Britain – across the political spectrum – support banning zero-hours contracts by offering all workers a contract that reflects their normal hours of work and compensation for cancelled shifts.

Tim added: “What I what I hope we’re going to see because of a ban is greater security for workers, but also employers investing in their staff training. The situation we have now is one where – in parts of the economy – the relationships with employers and workers are fleeting and transactional and without much investment. So, I hope that it’s going to lead to a situation where employers find that they’ve got more experienced, committed workers and that the workers get the security that they’ve told us in this poll that they desperately want.”

Backing up these sentiments, TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak commented: “Most people on zero-hours contracts would much rather have the security of guaranteed hours and to be able to plan their lives properly.

“The so-called ‘flexibility’ these contracts offer is hugely one-sided with shifts regularly cancelled at the last minute – often without any compensation. I would challenge anyone to try and survive on a zero-hours contract not knowing from week to week how much work they will have.”

He added: “It’s time to drive up employment standards in this country and to make work pay for everyone.

“The government’s forthcoming employment rights bill will help create a level playing field – and stop good employers from being undercut by the bad.”

Photo: Tim Sharp, credit to Jess Hurd