Resolution Foundation BRIEFING

# Take it or leave it

## Workers' experiences of power in low-paid and precarious sectors

**Melanie Simms & Hannah Slaughter**

May 2026

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This note uses data from a survey of 2,000 members of Organise – a worker-led platform with over 1 million members that brings together people across all sectors, roles and workplaces to team up for better work – who work in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors. Organise has in the past received funding from Resolution Ventures, the social investment arm of the Resolution Foundation. We are grateful to the Organise team for their support, and to the survey respondents and those who took part in follow-up in-depth interviews for sharing their views and experiences. The survey results have been analysed independently by the Resolution Foundation, including reweighting to be representative of the sectors we focus on by age, gender and sector, and the views expressed here are not the views of Organise.

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Parts of this work were undertaken in the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service using data from ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

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## Summary

The UK labour market is in the middle of the biggest overhaul of employment rights in a generation as the Employment Rights Act (ERA) 2025 begins to take effect. But regulation is only part of the route to better work. In this briefing note – the third in a series on the bottom end of the labour market, supported by Unbound Philanthropy – we focus on the balance of informal power between workers and employers in three sectors characterised by high levels of low pay and precarity.

The decline in collective bargaining – historically the main route through which workers have had a say over their terms and conditions – is well documented. Over the last 20 years, the proportion of workers whose pay is set by a collective agreement has fallen from 50 per cent to 40 per cent, and is lower in many parts of the economy where pay is low and precarity is high, such as in hospitality (9 per cent), cleaning and maintenance (14 per cent) and warehousing (38 per cent). As a result, individual power in the labour market has become increasingly important in giving workers a say over their terms and conditions. And yet, it has also declined over time and is weaker in low-paid jobs: the proportion of workers in the lowest hourly pay quintile who reported significant influence over decisions affecting their job fell from 23 per cent in 1992, to 14 per cent in 2024.

To better understand how workers in low-paid and precarious sectors experience their individual power, we surveyed 2,000 employees in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors who are members of Organise (a platform that brings workers together to share information, provide mutual support and enact change), and carried out follow-up interviews with a number of workers. The findings clearly show that these workers lack voice over their pay. More than half of respondents (55 per cent) say it is set unilaterally by their employer (45 per cent) or by the minimum wage or real Living Wage (16 per cent), with 5 per cent reporting both. The rates are especially high among workers on zero-hours contracts, six-in-ten (61 per cent) of whom have their pay set through one of these methods. Individual negotiation is rare: only one-in-twenty (6 per cent) of respondents say that they have negotiated pay changes themselves.

Most workers want this to change: 86 per cent of those surveyed want more say over how their pay is set. But perhaps more surprisingly, the groups who typically have the least labour market power – women, younger workers (aged under 35) and those on zero-hours contracts – are also the least likely to want more of a say over their pay. Interviews suggest one possible reason: some workers simply do not see greater voice at work as a possibility, and are resigned to a lack of power being 'just how it is' in their workplace or wider sector.

Lack of voice and disengagement also show up in the actions that people say they would take if they felt their pay was unfair. Just 15 per cent say they would push back

individually, and a further 21 per cent say they would work with colleagues to effect change. Overall, just over one-third of employees in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing (38 per cent) say that they would either do one of these things or 'something else' (in other words, that they would take some form of action in response to unfair pay). At the other end of the spectrum, a similar proportion (34 per cent) say they would either do nothing at all (7 per cent) or that they are not sure (27 per cent), with the latter likely also reflecting disengagement. Again, there is substantial variation between groups: four-in-ten (39 per cent) under-35s, five-in-ten (50 per cent) women and nearly six-in-ten (57 per cent) zero-hours contract workers say they would either do nothing or be unsure what action to take in the face of unfair pay.

We heard in interviews that workers' influence over their wider terms and conditions beyond pay is more uneven. Pay is often set by senior managers or HR departments, whereas issues like the allocation of hours and shifts, and informal flexibility around workers' lives – such as being able to take a day off at short notice – are usually in the hands of individual line managers. As a result, workers with inflexible managers often have little power over these non-pay attributes of the job. Conversely, given how similar pay tends to be across jobs in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing, what distinguishes a good job from a bad one is often how accommodating the manager is.

Another way that workers can exercise their individual power is by leaving, or threatening to leave, their employer. Just over a quarter of respondents (28 per cent) say they would move on if they were unhappy with their pay: 24 per cent by looking for another job, and 4 per cent by quitting even without another job lined up. But workers feel pessimistic about their prospects of moving elsewhere. More than three-fifths (62 per cent) of respondents say they would find it difficult or impossible to find another job with similar pay in their local area, with this pessimism higher among younger workers and those on zero-hours contracts. This finding may appear to go against headline labour market statistics showing that unemployment and vacancies, although weakening, remain relatively strong by international and historical standards. But *suitable* jobs may be scarcer than the headline numbers imply once sector, location and personal circumstances are taken into account, and some of the workers we interviewed said they felt there was strong competition for the jobs that exist.

Some have accused the ERA of going too far, but the evidence in this note shows why it is needed. It is naïve to think that individual workers can always push back against poor pay and conditions on their own; robust and properly enforced regulation is needed to protect workers, especially where their power is weak. But policy and practice can also strengthen workers' power in the first place.

Since voice over non-pay conditions often hinges on individual line managers, employers and employer groups should lead on improving management practices through providing training and support. In the longer term, Fair Pay Agreements could help give workers a collective voice in setting higher standards for good work, and the Government should start thinking now about how this could work in cleaning and warehousing in particular, where the ERA is less likely to resolve sector-specific issues. Improving workers' outside options is also central to strengthening individual power, and the Government should monitor labour market conditions at a local and sectoral level that reflects how workers think about their options. Finally, technology can play a role in helping workers compare pay and conditions, find jobs and access training.

The Government has begun an ambitious employment rights agenda: the next step is for the Government, employers and other organisations to work together to ensure that workers in precarious sectors have real voice and real options.

## As collective bargaining has declined, individual worker power has begun to matter more

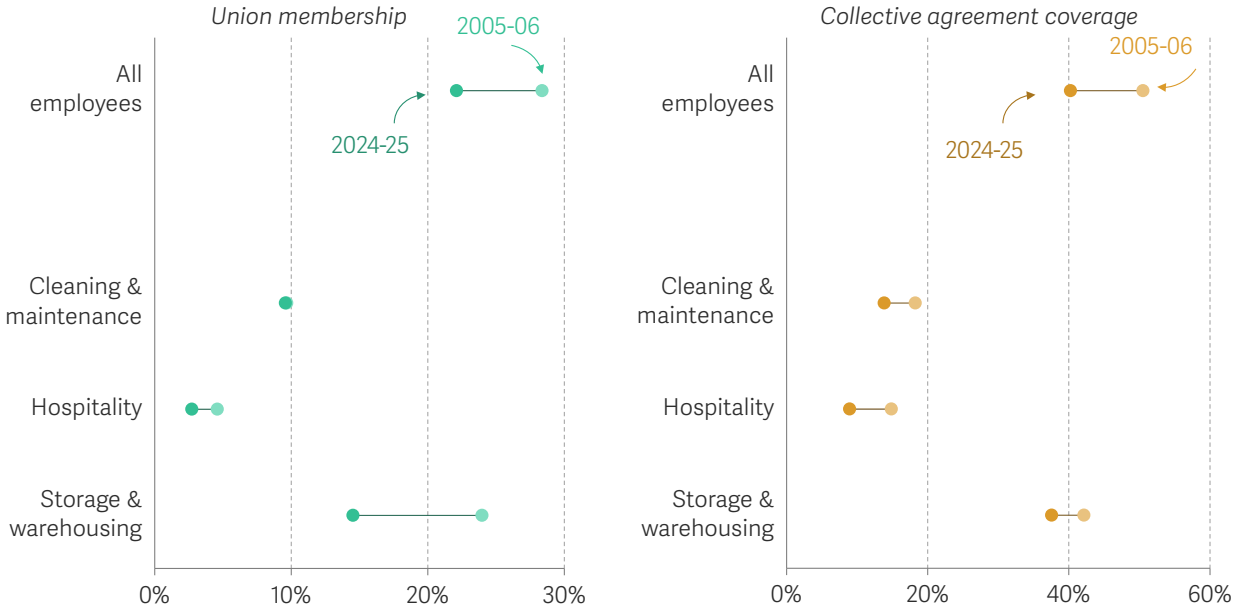
The UK labour market is in the midst of the biggest overhaul of employment rights in a generation. The Employment Rights Act (ERA) 2025 gives workers new individual and collective rights, improving minimum terms and conditions and strengthening workers' ability to shape those conditions collectively through trade union representation.[1] But regulation is only part of the route to better work. It is the balance of power between workers and employers that determines whether workers can go beyond the rights that regulation provides (by pushing their pay and conditions above the minimum), as well as secure a good settlement in areas where there are no formal employment rights.

Historically, collective bargaining has been the main way workers have been able to shape their pay, terms and conditions. But that route has weakened over time, as Figure 1 shows. Union membership has fallen from 28 per cent in 2005-2006 to 22 per cent in 2024-2025 (and is down from a peak of 52 per cent in 1980), and over the past 20 years, the proportion of workers whose pay is set by any kind of collective agreement has fallen from 50 to 40 per cent.[2] Rates of collective bargaining are even lower in many low-paying sectors of the labour market: in hospitality, only 3 per cent of workers are union members and only 9 per cent of jobs are covered by a collective agreement; in cleaning and maintenance, the figures are 10 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.

1 Department for Business and Trade, Implementing the Plan to Make Work Pay and Employment Rights Act, February 2026.
2 U Altunbuken et al., Power plays: The shifting balance of employer and worker power in the UK labour market, Resolution Foundation, July 2022.

FIGURE 1: **Collective bargaining is in decline, especially in many low-paying sectors**

Proportion of employees who are members of a trade union, and proportion of jobs where pay is set with reference to a collective agreement, by selected low-paying sectors: UK/GB



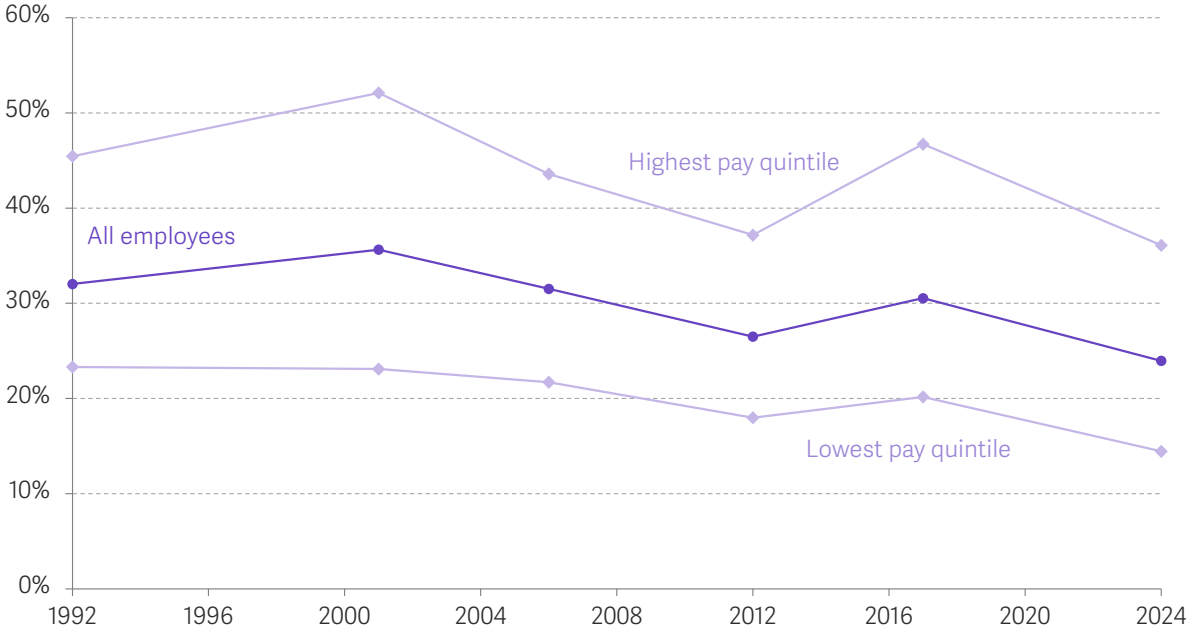

NOTES: Low-paying sectors are defined by the Low Pay Commission based on industry and occupation. Union membership data is from the Labour Force Survey and covers the whole of the UK; collective agreement coverage is from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings and covers GB only.
SOURCE: RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey; ONS, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings.

Aside from collective agreements, an individual worker can use their own power to shape their terms and conditions. That worker power can be exercised in two main ways: by using their voice to shape the terms and conditions of their current job, or by seeking better employment elsewhere.[3] But evidence of individual workers shaping their employment has declined over time. For example, as Figure 2 shows, the proportion of workers in the lowest hourly pay quintile who report having significant influence over decisions affecting their job fell from 23 per cent in 1992 to 14 per cent in 2024.

3 A Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States, Harvard University Press, 1970.

FIGURE 2: **Workers' voice at work has fallen since the early 2000s, especially in lower-paid jobs**

Proportion of employees who report significant influence over decisions affecting their job, by hourly pay quintile: UK




NOTES: This is defined as the proportion of employees who say they have an influence over decisions affecting them at work and that this
SOURCE: RF analysis of UK Skills and Employment Survey.

So, how do workers in low-paying sectors experience their individual power? To explore this question, we conducted a survey of 2,000 members of Organise, a worker-led platform with over 1 million members that brings together people across all sectors, roles and workplaces to team up for better work (Box 1 sets out more information about Organise, the sample and its representativeness). We surveyed employees in the hospitality, cleaning and warehousing industries, all sectors that are low-paying and have high rates of precarious work.[4] Together, these sectors employ 2.1 million people, or 7 per cent of the workforce.[5] We supplemented this data with six in-depth interviews of survey respondents to understand more about the way people in these sectors think about their power in the workplace. In the rest of this note, we examine how workers in these sectors feel about how their voice at work, before turning to their perceived opportunities to move jobs.[6]

4 We define precarious work as employed people on zero-hours contracts, variable-hours contracts, gig economy workers, temporary non-contract work, and the solo self-employed; who are also paid below two-thirds of median hourly pay or below the median household income. For further details, see: H Slaughter & I Stone, Precarious prospects: Understanding precarious work among foreign-born workers, Resolution Foundation, April 2025, https://doi.org/10.63492/JFRT934. The rates of precarious work in hospitality, building services (which includes cleaning) and transport and storage (which includes warehousing) are 24, 34 and 17 per cent respectively, compared with 10 per cent across the economy. Source: RF analysis of ISER, Understanding Society. For a discussion of broader precarity in the cleaning and warehousing sectors, see also: C McCurdy, H Slaughter & G Kelly, Putting good work on the table: Reforming labour market institutions to improve pay and conditions, Resolution Foundation, September 2023.

5 RF analysis of ONS, Labour Force Survey.

6 Because we only surveyed employees, uses of the term 'workers' in this note when discussing our survey results refer to employees only.

## BOX 1: Surveying Organise members

Organise is an online platform whose mission is to give workers the tools, the network and the confidence to improve their lives at work.[7] Survey respondents were recruited by Organise through the platform and at the end of the survey were given the opportunity to opt in to being contacted for a follow-up interview. The total sample size was 2,000, and all results reported here are based on a sample size of at least 100.

We have weighted the survey data to be representative of the sectors we cover by age, gender and industry.[8] However, there are some important demographic characteristics that we do not observe, and so cannot reweight for, such as ethnicity, qualification level, and migration status.

Of course, our survey respondents may differ from the average worker by virtue of the fact that they have joined Organise. This bias could work in different ways. It may be that, because they are actively engaged in workplace issues, our survey respondents might feel that they have more individual power than the typical worker. On the other hand, Organise members may have been motivated to join the platform because they have directly experienced unfair treatment at work.

Finally, it is important to note that we surveyed employees only, and so do not cover gig work or precarious forms of self-employment, where many of the worst conditions are concentrated.

## Individual negotiation over pay is rare in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing

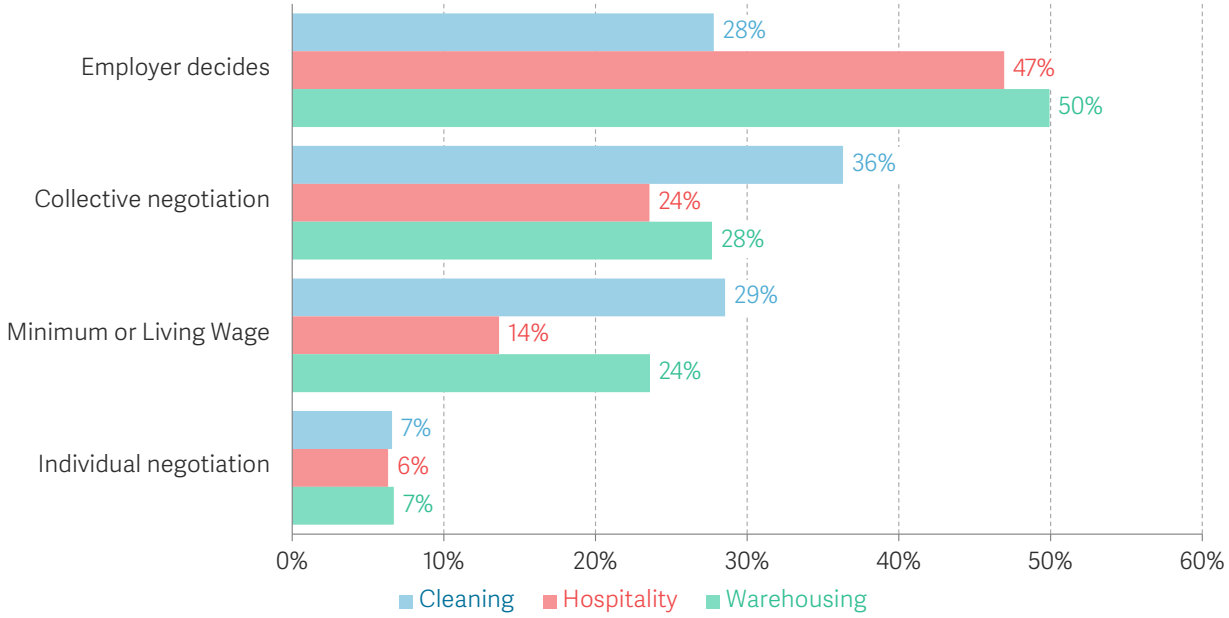
Our survey shows, first, that workers lack voice over pay: around half of workers in the hospitality and warehousing sectors (47 per cent and 50 per cent), and over a quarter (28 per cent) of workers in the cleaning sector, have their pay set unilaterally by their employer (see Figure 3). More than half (55 per cent) of workers across these sectors say their pay is either set through this channel or externally by the minimum wage or real Living Wage (45 per cent and 16 per cent respectively, with some workers saying that both apply to them).[9]

7 For further details, see: about.organise.network/what-we-do, accessed 20 May 2026. Organise has in the past received funding from Resolution Ventures, the social investment arm of the Resolution Foundation.
8 We use the 'reweight2' package in Stata (J Browne, REWEIGHT2, Institute for Fiscal Studies, July 2012) and weight up to totals in the Labour Force Survey averaged over the four quarters to Q3 2025.
9 The survey question allowed respondents to select more than one route, given that pay setting in practice often combines several mechanisms. Someone who is on the minimum wage, for example, might reasonably also say that their employer sets their pay, because it is their employer who communicates the pay rate and has chosen to pay the legal floor rather than a higher rate.

Even when workers do have a say, it more often comes from collective, rather than individual efforts. Collective negotiation is more prevalent among workers in the cleaning sector (36 per cent) than hospitality (24 per cent) and warehousing (28 per cent).[10] But individual negotiation is equally rare across these sectors: just 6 per cent on average across all three sectors say they have negotiated their own pay.

FIGURE 3: **Workers in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors rarely negotiate over their pay**

Proportion of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors who report different ways that their pay is set, by sector: UK, March 2026



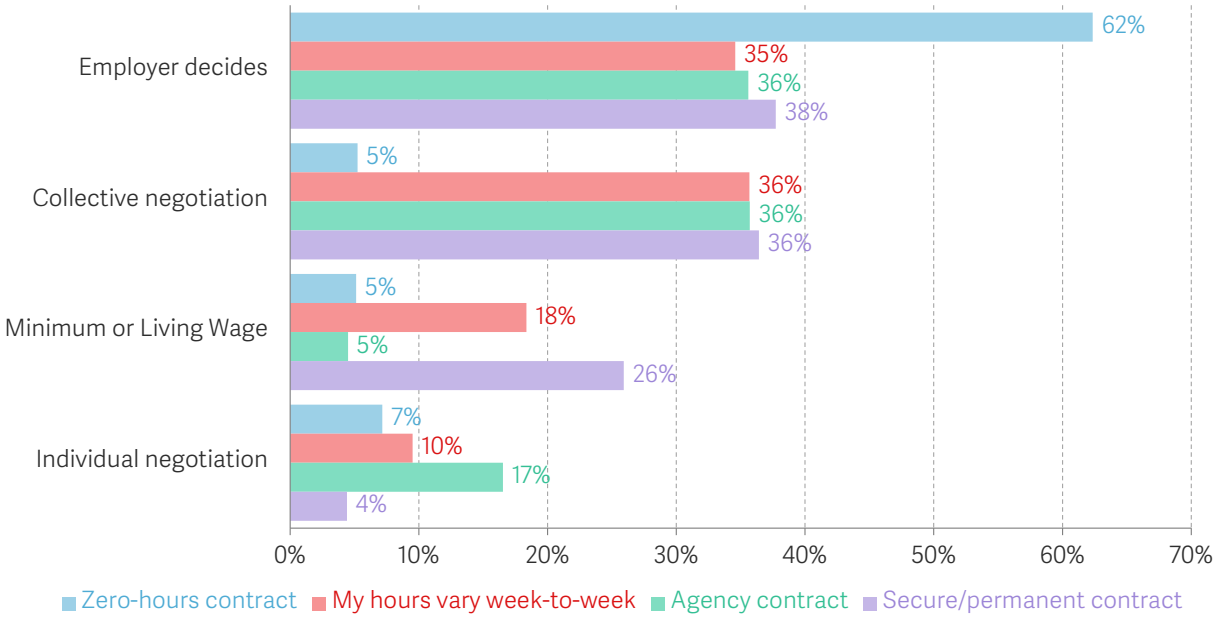

NOTES: Employees only. Categories are not mutually exclusive. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

The way in which pay is set varies by contract type (see Figure 4). Workers on a zero-hours contract are the most likely to report having their pay set by their employer without asking them: 62 per cent, compared with 38 per cent for workers on secure, permanent contracts. The picture is very different for workers on other flexible contracts: those on agency contracts report the highest rates of individual negotiation (17 per cent), and rates of collective negotiation are similar for workers on agency and variable-hours contracts as those on secure, permanent contracts (all 36 per cent).

10 This suggests a higher rate of collective negotiation than the collective agreement coverage shown in Figure 1. The discrepancy is likely to be because we ask a different question – including, for example, that we do not limit respondents to formal collective agreements, but also include workplace groups and other informal collective action. It may also reflect the characteristics of Organise members, as discussed in Box 1.

FIGURE 4: **Unilateral pay-setting by employers is especially common for workers on a zero-hours contract**

Proportion of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors who report different ways that their pay is set, by contract type: UK, March 2026




NOTES: Employees only. Categories are not mutually exclusive. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

Our interviews shed light on how these pay-setting processes feel to workers. Pay is usually set centrally by senior managers or HR departments, and the National Living Wage (NLW) provides an important benchmark.[11] Many employers use the April NLW uplift to structure pay rises across the workforce. But the process is largely opaque to workers: few of those we spoke to could recall any explanation of how or why their wages were changing.

> *"We're told every April, basically, and then that's it for the year."*

> *"This is the letter, this is what you're getting."*

> *"It would be nice to know that there was some sort of insight into [my pay increase]."*

As the tone of these accounts suggests, the absence of any meaningful voice over pay was often felt to be unfair. Workers described pay setting not as a negotiation, but as a one-way communication of decisions that had already been taken.

11 See also: CIPD, Reward management: Focus on pay, December 2019, which found that it is usually HR departments, senior management or boards who endorse and approve pay rises and set the overall wage budget, and CIPD, Pay, performance and transparency 2024, February 2024, which found that 33 per cent of employers said that minimum wage increases were key in influencing base pay increases for non-managerial, professional and technical staff.

> *"I found that [lack of voice over pay] unfair. But there weren't even, after all this time being there, there weren't even a one-on-one."*

Even when workers did try to raise questions about pay, requests for a conversation could be ignored. One worker we interviewed, paid above the NLW, did have a conversation with managers about their pay, but reported that internal recruits often had more scope for negotiation than external hires. This sense of unfairness and lack of transparency was compounded by a lack of opportunity to discuss pay once in post.

> *"You're told exactly what, you're given that. And I think you're hung more on the promotion itself…So I'm quite vocal and I have questioned my, you know, like my rewards, like my performance reviews and you know, it just falls on deaf ears. It's kind of like, this is what we've decided."*

Formal mechanisms for workers to share their views, such as staff forums or employee surveys, did exist in some workplaces. But interviewees told us that their input was rarely acted on, leaving them feeling sceptical that these forums offered a genuine route to influence.[12]

> *"[We have] this [staff] forum, where you can raise … for example, if you'd like a pay rise, and then these people just basically pass that message to the managers. … But basically it's up to the business."*

> *"You can [speak up] on the surveys anonymously, but nothing ever happens."*

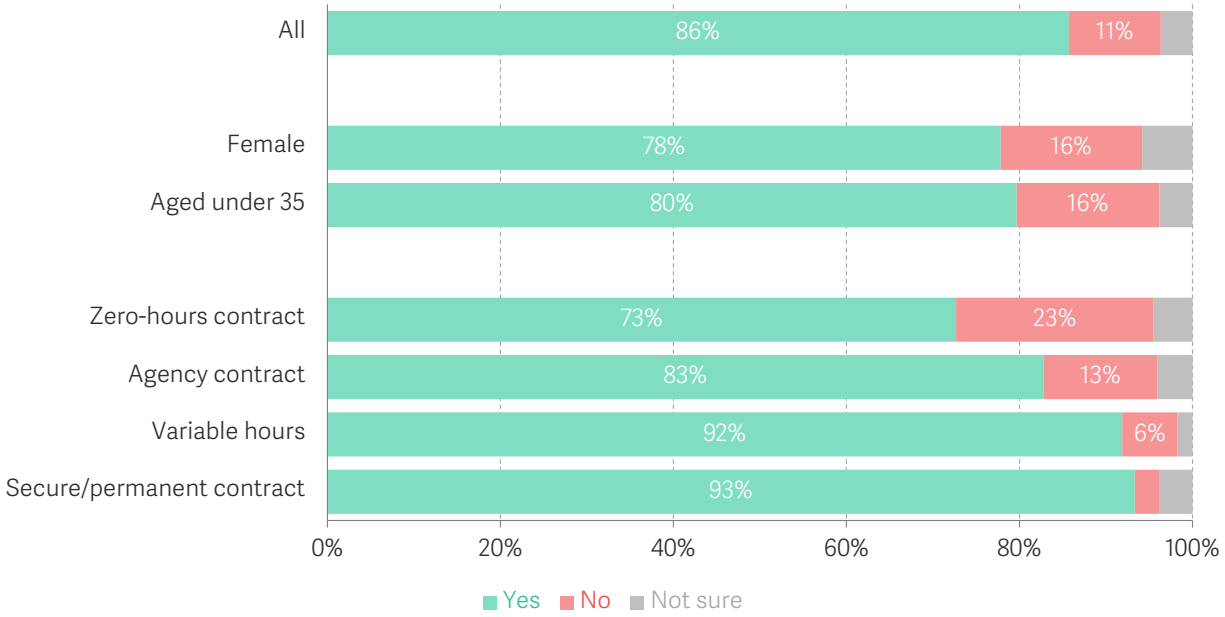
## Workers want more say over how their pay is set, but many do not see this as realistic

Most workers want this to change: 86 per cent of those surveyed want more say over how their pay is set, and just 11 per cent do not (Figure 5). But perhaps more surprisingly, the groups who typically have the least labour market power are also the least likely to want more say over their pay. The proportion of workers saying they want more say falls to 80 per cent among under-35s, 78 per cent among women, and 73 per cent among workers on a zero-hours contract. In fact, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of zero-hours contract workers say they do not want more say over their pay: more than double the rate across all workers in these sectors.

12 This chimes with trends across the economy as a whole: since the early 1990s, there have been increases in the proportion of workers who take part in forums to raise workplace issues, such as consultative meetings and quality circles, but a decrease in the proportion who say they have influence over organisational decisions. See: D Gallie et al., What is Happening to Participation at Work? First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, April 2025.

FIGURE 5: **Most workers in key low-paying sectors want more say over their pay, but this is less common among groups with lower labour market power**

Proportion of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors reporting whether they want more say over how their pay is set, by selected characteristics: UK, March 2026




NOTES: Employees only. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

Some of those who do not want more of a say over their pay may be happy with what they earn, or at least content for the decision to be out of their hands. But our interviews suggest that this could instead reflect disengagement, and workers not seeing greater voice at work as a realistic possibility. This might be because pay decisions are presented by employers as simply non-negotiable, or due to a sense of resignation to the norms of the sector and a belief that things are not going to change. This might help explain why some of the workers with the least power are also the least likely to want more of it: given the context above, wanting a greater say might be simply unrealistic.

> *"When you get hired … in one of these sorts of corporations, that is the wage, whether you like it or not. [Interviewer: Did you feel you could have asked for a higher wage?] Oh no, not at all. I think they would have told me to go away."*

> *"At the end of the day, you're a number to these companies. If you don't do the job, somebody else will. … I have to work and I just have to accept the conditions and the pay that they give me."*

> *[Interviewer: Would you negotiate a higher wage?] "They don't allow it. … Everyone gets paid the same. … And that's just the way it is."*

## An employee's influence over non-pay conditions often hinges on individual managers

Our survey suggests there is some difference, however, between pay and other terms and conditions. Although the pay-setting processes were largely invisible to workers, line managers were a much more tangible influence over aspects of work such as the allocation of hours and shifts, and informal flexibility such as being able to take a day off at short notice. That often – although by no means always – meant that workers had more capacity to influence non-pay conditions, both because they could speak directly to the decision makers and because there was more discretion built in.

But workers' experiences of their line managers varied widely. Most interviewees gave examples of managers they saw as 'good' or 'bad'. A good manager could reconcile someone to staying in a job that was otherwise unappealing in terms of pay or other aspects of the job. But a bad manager might mean not being allocated shifts after calling in sick, or finding it difficult to take a day off at short notice.

> *"Back when I worked at [my previous job], I phoned in sick one shift. Then two weeks after, there was an extra shift, I tried to pick it up. My manager messaged me directly and said … 'we found someone else to do it, you're too unreliable because you rang in sick'."*

Some interviewees described how line managers could make life difficult by not accommodating their personal circumstances, such as not altering schedules to accommodate health conditions. In these cases, the choice was framed as either accepting the situation or looking for an alternative job.

Interviewees also recognised how quickly things could change when one manager was replaced by another. One worker who regularly worked beyond their contracted hours described how a previous manager had offered them substantial autonomy over their working hours, but a new manager took a very different approach, offering far less flexibility, ultimately leading them to leave the role and the company.

> *"Even though I did those additional hours, I was kind of in charge of my own time within that role. I think that was good until my last manager [I had] before I left."*

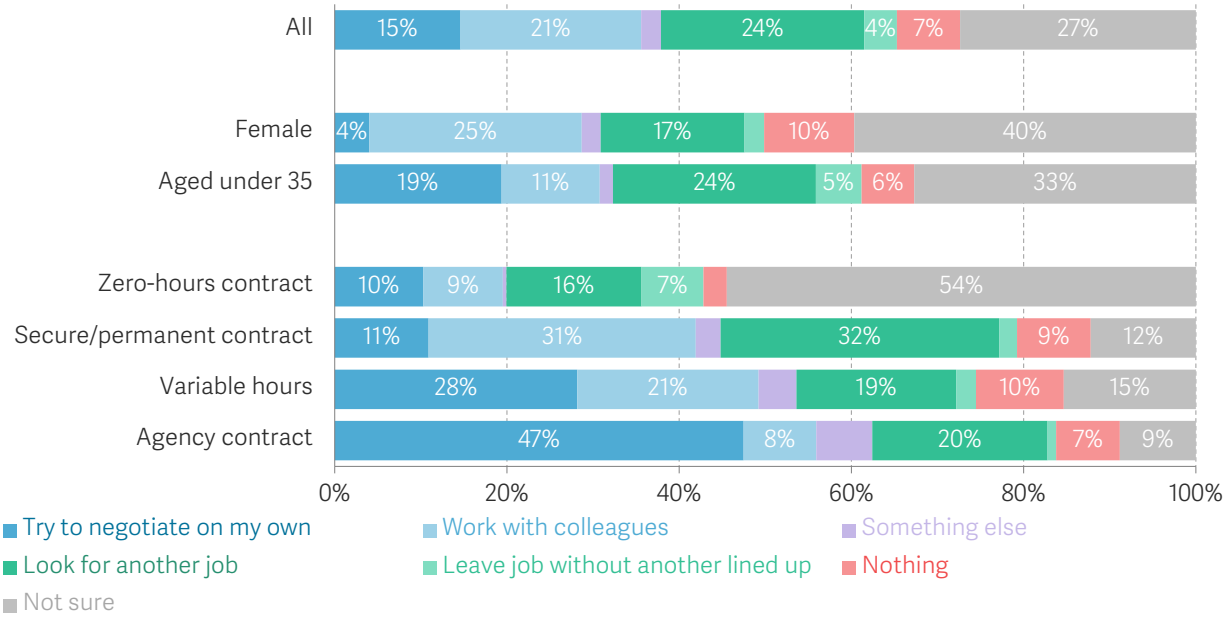
## Only one-third of workers in the low-paying sectors we focus on would push back over unfair pay, either individually or collectively

The same patterns of low voice and disengagement show up when workers are asked what they would do if they felt their pay was unfair. As Figure 6 shows, only 15 per cent of workers in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing say they would try to negotiate on their

own, and a further 21 per cent say they would work with colleagues. Adding in the small proportion (2 per cent) who would do 'something else', just over one-in-three workers (38 per cent) would take some form of voice-based action in response to unfair pay. At the other end of the spectrum, a similar proportion (34 per cent) say they would do nothing at all (7 per cent) or are not sure what they would do (27 per cent); as before, this latter group likely reflects disengagement with pay-setting processes.

FIGURE 6: **A third of workers in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing would speak up if they were unhappy with their pay, but a similar fraction would do nothing or are unsure what they would do**

Proportion of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors reporting the main action they would take if they felt their pay was unfair, by selected characteristics: UK, March 2026




NOTES: Employees only. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

Again, there are substantial differences between groups. Women are very unlikely to say that they would negotiate individually (just 4 per cent would do so, compared with 15 per cent of all workers), but are slightly more likely than average to say they would act collectively (25 per cent, compared with an average of 21 per cent).[13] Workers under 35 are more willing than average to try individual negotiation (19 per cent), but less inclined to act with colleagues. And the starkest pattern is among workers on zero-hours contracts: more than half (54 per cent) are not sure what they would do, and a further 3 per cent say they would do nothing, with only one-in-five (20 per cent) saying they would take any form of voice-based action. By contrast, almost half (47 per cent) of agency

13 This pattern holds after controlling for sector and age.

workers would negotiate on their own; this is likely a feature of agency work itself, where pay is regularly negotiated from assignment to assignment.

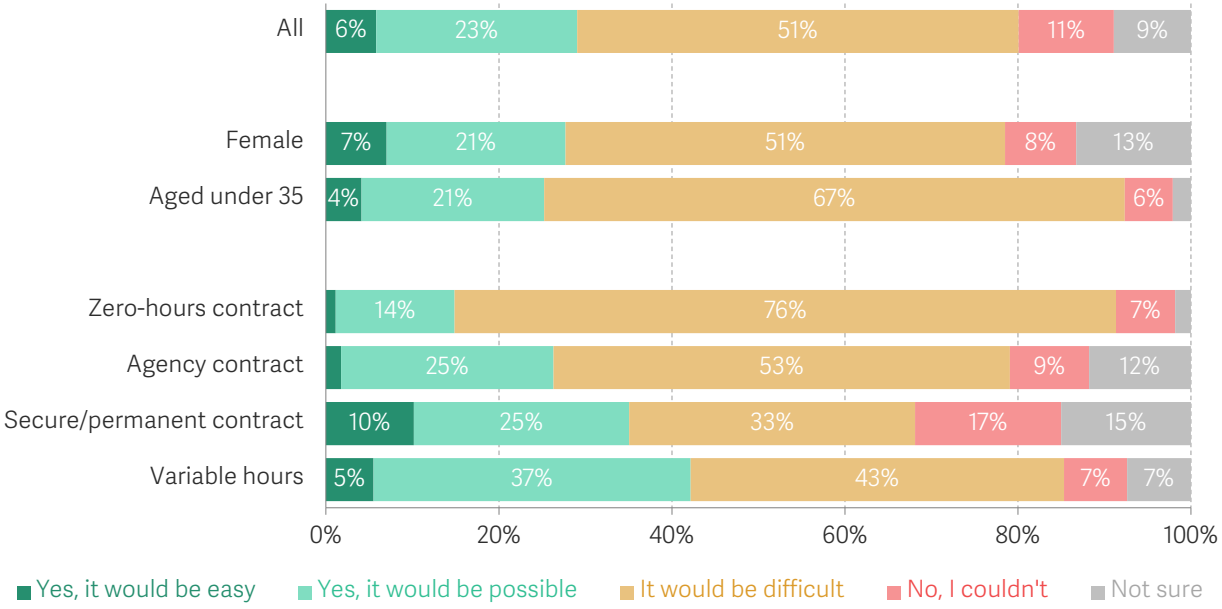
## Workers perceive their outside options to be constrained

If workers do not get a say and would not voice their concerns, would they instead exert their individual power by leaving, or threatening to leave, their employer? The green bars in Figure 6 show that more than a quarter would: 24 per cent would look for another job if they were unhappy with their pay, and a further 4 per cent would leave even without another job lined up.

But our respondents suggest that finding another job would not be easy. Three-fifths (62 per cent) of workers in cleaning, hospitality and warehousing say they would find it difficult or impossible to find another job with similar pay in their local area (see Figure 7). The same proportion (62 per cent) holds among those who said looking elsewhere would be their first response to unfair pay. Again, younger workers and those on a zero-hours contract feel most constrained: over seven-in-ten (73 per cent) under-35s, and more than eight-in-ten (83 per cent) workers on a zero-hours contract say they would find it difficult or impossible to find another job.[14]

FIGURE 7: **The majority of workers in key low-paying sectors say they would find it difficult or impossible to find another job**

Proportion of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors reporting whether they would be able to find another job in their local area that paid a similar amount, by selected characteristics: UK, March 2026




NOTES: Employees only. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

14 As before, although there is substantial overlap between these two groups, both age and being on zero-hours contract independently drive a lack of perceived options.

This pessimism may seem surprising, given that labour market conditions remain relatively strong by international and historical standards, even as they have weakened in recent months.[15] But low-paying sectors have recently shed jobs much faster than average: employment in hospitality has fallen by 2.8 per cent since October 2024, compared with 0.6 per cent across the economy as a whole.[16] Moreover, the headline number of jobs may also overstate the options that are open to these workers. Our survey asked specifically about jobs in workers' local area, and respondents are likely to have considered only jobs they could realistically take up given personal constraints, such as caring responsibilities, transport options, or health conditions. The workers we interviewed said the issue was not a lack of jobs per se, but strong competition for the jobs that do exist. And they also described feeling risk-averse, having just come through one cost of living crisis and facing the prospect of another.[17]

> *"I'm trying to find a new job. And it's very difficult. The competition within [the job search], it's very, very, very high. And also the pay that they are offering, it's not good at all."*

> *"Obviously unemployment is quite high and I'm acutely aware of that. … Every time we put out a job vacancy, there are a lot of people who apply for it."*

> *"Particularly at this time of year, the way the cost of living is going … Like if I didn't have an income, Universal Credit … is simply not enough to live off. So I have to work and I just have to accept the conditions and the pay that they give me."*

## Zero-hours contract workers experience both low voice and limited outside options

The results discussed above tell a consistent story of low voice at work and limited outside options across cleaning, hospitality and warehousing, but also that the experience is not the same for all workers. Figure 8 shows how different demographic groups compare with the average across our three sectors and across two key measures – voice at work on the horizontal axis, and outside options on the vertical axis – after controlling for the other characteristics that we can observe.[18]

15 For example, the unemployment rate was just above 5 per cent in the second half of 2025 – but this is still low compared with even the financial crisis, when unemployment peaked at 8.5 per cent in autumn 2011, let alone the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s when the unemployment rate topped 10 per cent.

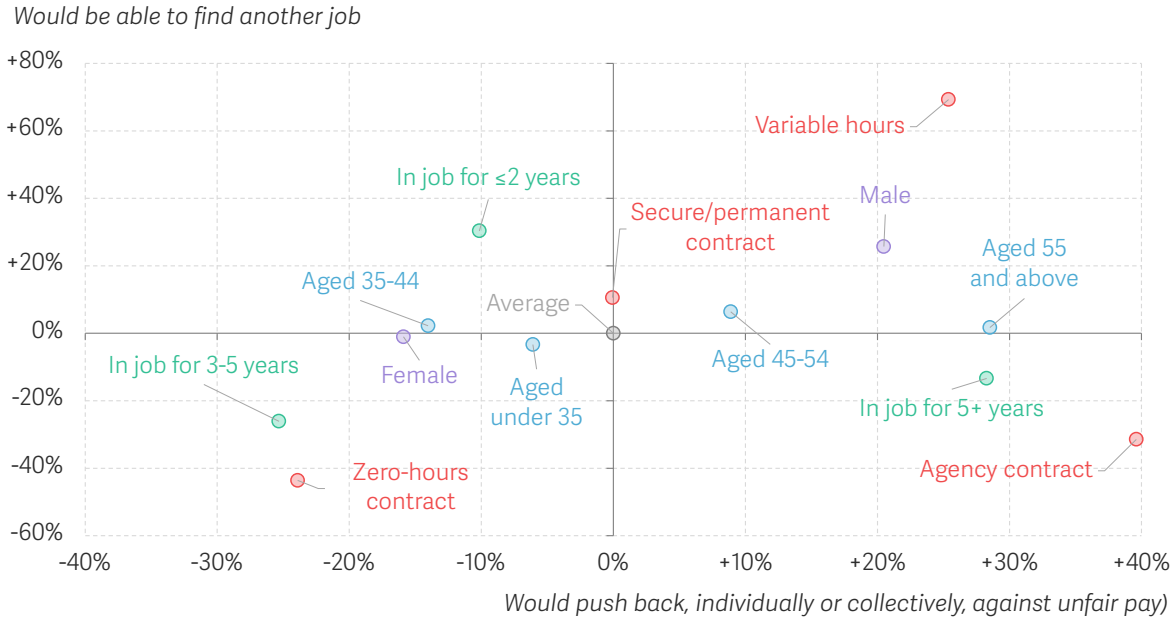
16 Office for National Statistics & HM Revenue & Customs, Earnings and employment from Pay As You Earn Real Time Information, seasonally adjusted, May 2026. These figures compare October 2024, when payrolled employment peaked, with March 2026, the latest data point that is not a flash estimate (which are prone to large revisions).

17 We asked here about prospects for finding a similarly paid job. But it is also worth noting that outside options also offer only limited prospects for progression into better-paid work: in the majority of cases, low-paid jobs do not act as stepping stones to jobs with better pay and conditions. See, for example: C D'Arcy & D Finch, The Great Escape? Low pay and progression in the UK's labour market, Resolution Foundation, October 2017.

18 Each data point shows the predicted probability that each group would (i) push back individually or collectively against unfair pay (horizontal axis) and (ii) say they would be able to find another job (vertical axis), expressed as the percentage difference from the sample average. The predicted probabilities are estimated as average marginal effects from a logistic regression of each outcome on sector, gender, age, job tenure and contract type, so each characteristic shown is adjusted for all the others.

FIGURE 8: **Being on a zero-hours contract is linked to lacking both voice and options, independently of other things we can control for**

Impact of each factor after adjusting for the other characteristics shown on the probability of respondents employed in the cleaning, hospitality and warehousing sectors reporting they would be able to find another job (vertical axis) and that they would push back individually or collectively against unfair pay (horizontal axis): UK, March 2026




NOTES: Employees only. Data weighted to be representative of employees by age, gender and sector. Colour coded by type of characteristic: age (blue), job tenure (green), contract type (red), gender (purple). Non-binary and other genders not included as a separate category due to small sample sizes.
SOURCE: RF analysis of Organise survey data.

This analysis shows that, for example, women report similar outside options to men, but are much less likely to negotiate or push back over pay, suggesting that they feel more constrained in their ability to exercise voice at work in comparison to their ability to exit their job. This resonates with large-scale studies showing that men are more likely to be socialised to negotiate their wages and, if they do try to negotiate, women's approaches to salary discussions vary in comparison with men's.[19]

Agency workers are more likely than average to push back against unfair pay: as Figure 6 showed, this is largely down to a high appetite to negotiate individually. However, they are around a third less likely than average to feel they would be able to find another job in their local area, suggesting that the constraints on their power lie in their exit options.

Workers on zero-hours contracts – who account for 16 per cent of employees in these three sectors – face the sharpest constraints. They are both less likely than average to feel able to speak up, and more likely to believe they have limited options elsewhere, even

19 See, for example: M Recalde & L Vesterlund, Gender Differences in Negotiation: Can Interventions Reduce the Gap?, Annual Review of Economics 15, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-092022-115353.

after controlling for other characteristics. There are likely multiple, intersecting dynamics that explain this finding. Speaking up may be perceived by these workers as bringing a risk of being given fewer hours of work or otherwise disadvantaged by managers. These workers may have fewer options in the labour market, which has led them to take zero-hours work in the first place. And it could reflect that zero-hours contracts are simply more likely to exist in parts of the labour market that recruit larger numbers of workers facing multiple forms of disadvantage, which we cannot account for in our data. Regardless of how these dynamics interact, efforts to regulate zero-hours contracts through the ERA are likely to shift the power balance towards workers in these parts of the labour market.

## Policy and practice can protect from the impacts of low power, and boost power itself

Some have accused the ERA of going too far – but the evidence in this note shows why it is overdue.[20] Workers in low-paying sectors feel they have very little power in the labour market – neither to shape their current job, nor to find similar or better work. Robust and properly enforced regulation is essential to protect workers where their power is weak; it would be naïve to expect workers to push back against poor pay and conditions on their own.

But progress in this area does not have to come entirely from legislation that gives workers more rights; policy and practice can also work together in key sectors to improve conditions and strengthen workers' power in the first place. One way to do this is through Fair Pay Agreements (FPAs). The Government should learn from the FPA now being set up in social care and consider how to expand to other sectors to give workers a collective voice in setting higher standards for good work. FPAs should be targeted at sectors where workers lack the power to shape their own terms and conditions, and the Government should start thinking now about how this could work in the cleaning and warehousing sectors in particular, where the rest of the ERA is less likely to resolve the specific problems workers face.[21] Training should be a central consideration of these FPAs, and this may also require agreeing standards for pay above the minimum to reflect workers' added responsibilities, training and experience.[22]

Since voice over non-pay conditions often hinges on individual line managers, employers and employer groups should lead on improving management practices by training and

20 See, for example: British Chambers of Commerce, Business groups set out employment rights concerns, April 2026.
21 C McCurdy, H Slaughter & G Kelly, Putting good work on the table: Reforming labour market institutions to improve pay and conditions, Resolution Foundation, September 2023.
22 The Government should also think carefully about how to enforce FPAs. The newly established Fair Work Agency should draw on good practice in enforcement – both giving workers ways to report non-compliance and proactively inspecting employers. As FPAs expand, the Government should commission evidence on 'what works' for compliance across sectors, and act on what it finds. For further discussion, see: C McCurdy, M Simms & H Slaughter, Care to negotiate?: Making a success of the Adult Social Care Negotiating Body, Resolution Foundation, December 2025, https://doi.org/10.63492/ykx616.

supporting them. The line manager's role is often underappreciated, but our evidence shows how important they are in tailoring terms and work conditions – especially informal flexibility – that help retain workers in these sectors. Better line management will help employers attract and keep workers, as well as give workers more say over non-pay conditions.

Improving workers' options to move to similar or better jobs is also central to strengthening individual power. The strength of the labour market and the wider economy shapes the options workers feel they have, and so general measures to widen labour market choices will help workers in these sectors. Strong economic growth across the country can help to deliver stronger local labour markets.[23] But specific measures could include exploring how employers can support the creation of jobs that are attractive to low-paid workers, improving careers advice, and improving access to occupational health. The Government could also help to reduce the financial risks of training and education for both workers and employers – though, as Box 2 sets out, training is not a panacea.

## BOX 2: **Training is often not a route to strengthening outside options**

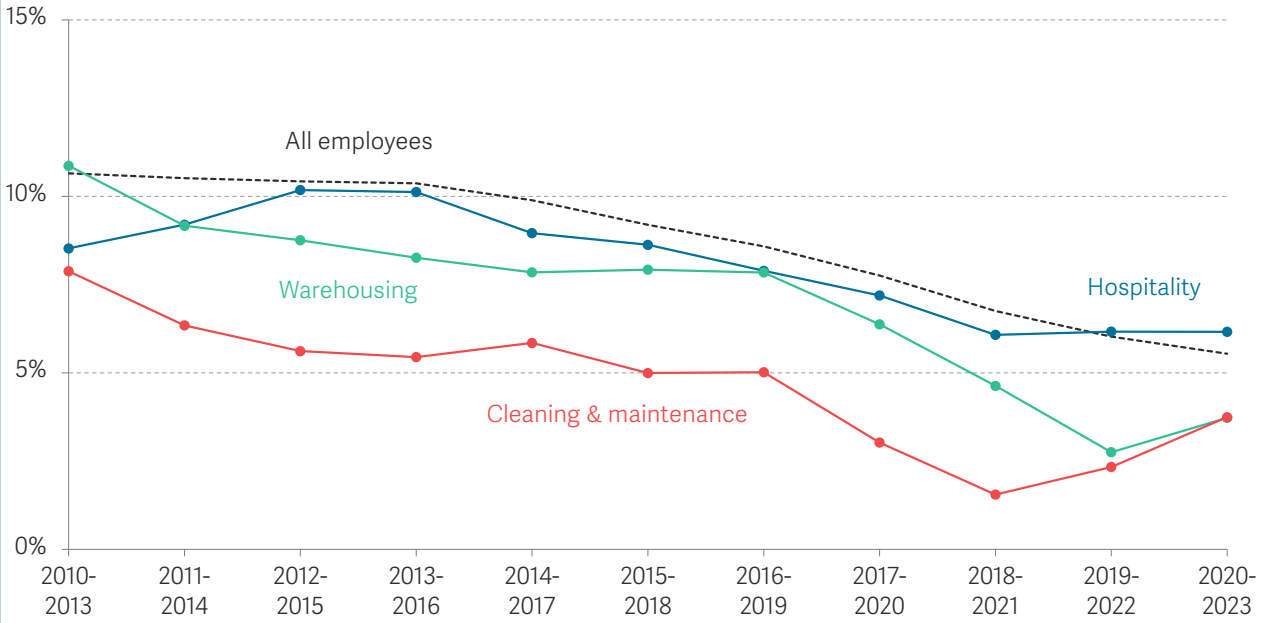
One route to finding a better job is improving skills. But workers often do not see training as a way to build their outside options. In part, that is because low-paid workers do not get much training: as Figure 9 shows, between 2020 and 2023 only 6 per cent of hospitality workers said they had received training in the past year that would help them with a job they might do in the future or to get a promotion, falling to 4 per cent in the warehousing and cleaning and maintenance sectors.

But even where training is offered, workers may not see it as a meaningful way to build transferrable skills or skill up for another job. The most common training among our interviewees was routine training for role-relevant tasks, such as health and safety, food preparation, and customer service in hospitality. Workers' experiences of the value of training in other jobs varied considerably. Some workers did feel that this training would be useful to them if they needed or wanted to look for another, similar job – customer service training, for example, would be useful in any customer-facing hospitality role – but others felt that the training they received was of very little wider use.

23 For more on improving economic growth, see, for example: E Christensen et al., Mountain climbing: Making progress on the UK's growth policy challenge, Resolution Foundation, January 2026, https://doi.org/10.63492/ntdl6708.

FIGURE 9: **Transferrable training is rare in low-paid jobs**

Proportion of employees who had received training to prepare them for a job they might do in the future or to help them get a promotion, by sector: UK




NOTES: Excludes full-time students. Each data point averages across three survey waves to increase sample sizes.
SOURCE: RF analysis of ISER, Understanding Society.

*"I was going to work in [a similar business] using the training that I've been given here. And it turns out that none of it was relevant at all. … I think the stuff that I learned was so specific to [my current job] that the training wasn't usable elsewhere."*

Training to help workers progress in their workplace was understood to be notably difficult to access. Some workers who had received training earlier in their career had seen their current employers benefit: for example, one worker who had been able to progress in the warehousing sector had learned project management skills early in their career, which their current employer had recognised and valued, despite them originally being hired into an entry-level role. But some workers also spoke of training to progress as a trade-off that was not always worth it, with one worker who had been trained as a shift manager noting that the extra responsibilities – supervising the team of workers, taking on health and safety responsibility for the workplace, and having to open and close – attracted very little additional pay.

*"They do [provide training] at the beginning. … To get other trainings in other departments, or cross-training other departments, or even get in a higher position, that is more difficult."*

Finally, technology can help workers compare pay and conditions, find jobs and access training. Platforms in several sectors already let workers confidentially share information about their terms and conditions.[24] Expanding them across the labour market could give workers a stronger sense of which employers might value their skills, and of the career paths that can act as 'stepping stones' to better jobs locally and beyond. Platforms that match workers' skills and experience to available jobs could also strengthen workers' sense of where they do have the power to exit low-paid jobs. There is also scope to develop ways for workers to share information about training they can access beyond their employer. Individual workers should not be left to bear the risk and cost of training alone: employers and the state both have important roles in sharing these costs, and the state can support employers and workers to develop more innovative approaches to this risk sharing.

The Government has begun an ambitious employment rights agenda, and the ERA strengthens individual, collective and institutional employment rights. But more is needed to help workers in low-paying sectors gain and use voice and power at work. It is now time for the Government and employers to work together, through FPAs and on wider best practice, to ensure that workers in low-paid and precarious jobs have real voice and real options.

24 Examples include Breakroom, Worker Info Exchange and Glassdoor.

# Annex 1

## Data citations

- Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (study page here):
  - Office for National Statistics. (2025). Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 1997-2025: Secure Access. [data collection]. 27th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6689, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6689-27
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  - Felstead, A., Gallie, D., Green, F., Henseke, G. (2026). Skills and Employment Surveys Series Dataset, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2017. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8589, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8589-1
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  - University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2025). Understanding Society. [data series]. 14th Release. UK Data Service. SN: 2000053, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-Series-2000053

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