

Engaging Red Wall Realists with Worker Protections



Surveys show conclusively that the UK public is strongly supportive of worker protections.¹

Our recent focus groups with Labour-Conservative switch voters in Burnley and Macclesfield suggest that public complacency about these protections is a significant challenge.

Participants generally assumed that rules were in place, workplaces were checked and employers who broke the rules faced tough consequences.

Indeed, data presented on weak minimum wage or health and safety enforcement was met with surprise, even disbelief.²

In this short note we set out some of the insights we drew from these conversations. We hope they will help those who campaign for strong protections in the labour market connect with and activate the support of this key voter group more effectively.

The Challenges:

Participants felt **DETACHED**

There was little connection between the protections offered by labour market regulations and the challenges participants faced in their own work. Those that had held employers to account described how they had largely done it off their own bat - “**standing up for themselves**” with little acknowledgement of the rules or policies that protect them.

Meanwhile, rules and protections were seen as being there for ‘others’, those who were vulnerable or worked in riskier sectors (such as, migrant workers in farming or clothes manufacturing). People felt concern, pity, disgust, compassion but less identification or solidarity.

Participants saw bad practices as a **FACT OF LIFE**

Most people we spoke to shared powerful **personal experiences of malpractice and abuse**: older workers made to feel unwanted as they approached retirement, women who had exposed substantive pay gaps, disabled workers facing unfair dismissal and younger workers pressured to work long hours or in unsafe conditions.

Despite this first-hand experiences of malpractice, participants dismissed their significance. **Ill-treatment had been incorporated into most of the participants’ understanding of how their working lives operated.** Most shared these experiences as normal facts of life.

Participants were **TURNED OFF** by process.

Participants tended to **respond negatively to the processes and policies associated with protecting workers**, even if their importance was understood.

Health and safety, for example, was widely recognised as critical and its role in creating safer workplaces was valued. However, this support was tempered by widely-held frustrations with the realities of form filling and box ticking.

Small business owners and those in clerical roles (who made up a large proportion of the participants) associated these rules with the daily grind of dealing with the bureaucracy surrounding these protections.

Participants in their own words...

“We need to have rules or **we’d have complete anarchy.**”

“It’s **security** in having those rules, isn’t it?”

“I want to look after **our people.**”

“Health and safety, don’t leave it to companies, it has to be **governed** by someone.”

“We’re **good** at that (making rules).”

“We were able to dominate the world. So, there was something in our policies and **rules that made us great.**”

“We just want to **be better than the rest of Europe** - better wages, better standards, better health and safety standards. We don’t want to go backwards.”

How to make the case

During our conversations we tested different narratives which we thought could generate engagement with the importance of worker protections. Narratives that worked best tended to share three features:

Make it feel POSSIBLE

Narratives which focused on the flaws and injustices of the labour market tended to activate a sense of powerlessness and heighten participants' cynicism about the possibility of change.

Conversely, narratives which emphasised the progress made historically and celebrated major landmarks, such as the abolition of child labour or the outlawing of gender discrimination, elicited far more positive engagement.

Participants engaged most positively with narratives that celebrated how the UK has a proud history of leading the world on improving standards. They also saw it as important to take active steps to continue on this trajectory.

Sources:

¹ [Leaving the EU, not the European model? \(ippr.org\)](#) and [1710-public-opinion-in-the-post-brexite-era-final.pdf. \(windows.net\)](#)

²See Unchecked UK's briefing [Labour market enforcement gap 2021 - Unchecked UK](#)

Make it about PEOPLE

Narratives that focused on rules, processes and policies exacerbates a sense of detachment and were generally off-putting.

Conversely, participants responded positively to narratives which focused on positive human outcomes such as security, wellbeing, safety, and family life.

Likewise, participants were receptive to examples of good employers who took care of their workers as an illustration of the fact that positive working practices were possible.

Find the right MESSENGER

Our conversations consistently revealed participants' strong inclination to trust (and thus listen to) spokespeople from the private sector.

Participants were keenest to hear from successful, self-made entrepreneurs who were seen to 'give back' to society (by investing in the community or treating workers as a 'family').

Straight talking business leaders, ideally ones with a strong local association, were the most strongly favoured messengers.

Conclusions

The UK benefits from a wealth of civil society groups working to promote stronger worker protections.

But our initial research suggests that there is important work to be done to boost levels public engagement with this issue among this critical section of the UK electorate.

We hope these insights will help campaigners and others reflect on how they can start to address this challenge.

About Unchecked UK

Unchecked believes that sensible, properly-enforced protections are the framework for a decent society – where the food we eat and the things we buy are safe, where the natural environment is protected, and where our homes and workplaces are secure.

We carry out research and investigations to highlight the loss of protection that results from the erosion of important rules and of the public bodies which enforce them. And we work with a range of supporters to develop effective strategies to activate greater public support for these protections.