

Transcript of 'Do You Know Your Employment Rights?'

Season 3, Episode 31, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Today we're talking employment rights, and that's relevant whether you've got a job, you want a job, or you've given someone else a job.

[Theme music]

Paul: Have you ever been in a tribunal Jan?

Jan: Uh, no.

Paul: Have you never done anything so hideously bad [Jan laughs] in your entire working career that you've been called before a tribunal?

Jan: Uh, no. Although I did once have to, um, consult somebody, um, who sort of ran a scheme if there was a dispute between, um, an employee and their accounting firm employer.

Paul: Were you the independent adjudicator?

Jan: No, no, no. I was the complainant.

Paul: You were a complainant?

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Paul: Sounds about right for you. [Jan laughs] Yes, yeah. No one ever complains against you, but you are happy to complain about everyone else.

Jan: Something like that, something like that. But I, but I think I've been very lucky in my working life in terms of, um, I've, I've worked primarily for universities who have quite, you know, good systems, I think for, for managing their staff.

Uh, we might complain from time to time, so, but I've always been...

Paul: [incredulously] ...from time to time? [Jan laughs] I don't, I don't think I've met an academic who doesn't have at least a five-minute gap between complaints.

Jan: Yes. But also that they're quite large organisations, so they, they ought to, uh, know what they're doing and how to go about being a proper employer.

Paul: They ought to, but large organisations don't necessarily always treat their employees well.

Jan: No, no. I didn't say treat them well, but you know...

Paul: ...they ought to know what they're doing. It doesn't mean they, they, they're nice...

Jan: ...well, they should comply with the law...

Paul: ...yes, comply with the law...

Jan: ...at least...

Paul: ...yes, yes, but not all do. And there are occasions, and this is where it becomes important that there are such things as workers' rights and employment rights.

Jan: I agree.

Paul: And yet you still, are you sure no one's ever brought a tribunal against, [Jan laughs] I find it really hard to believe...

Jan: ...not against me. Well, 'cause I've never employed anyone, 'cause I've, um, you see...

Paul: ...now it all becomes clear. Have you ever been in the HR meeting where you've had a complaint against you? Hundreds. [Jan laughs] Yeah, that makes a lot more sense. [laughs]

Jan: I think we should draw, draw a veil over this line of questioning. I'll get myself a bad reputation.

Paul: Yeah, that's the problem. I think you already have one. Um, so therefore, as we say, employment rights, how they're enshrined in law varies from country to country.

And the person we're gonna be talking to today is gonna tell us specifically about the situation here in the UK about, um, an Employment Rights Act that came about last year in 2025.

And it's gonna become really clear how important these pieces of legislation are, and may be surprising of before, what the situation was before certain acts were put in place.

Jan: It is indeed, and it kind of reminds me of a conversation we've had before about regulation, um, and actually making sure that there's, there's good regulation in order to protect people who are, um, in, you know, maybe in consumer areas or in, um, local communities or unemployment.

Paul: Yes, right. So who are we gonna speak to? Well, we're going to speak to the Head of Research at the Work Foundation, and that's Lancaster University's own thinktank for improving work in the UK. And so we're going to say hello to Alice Martin. Hello Alice.

Alice: Hello there. Thanks for having me on.

Paul: Have you ever been in a tribunal, Alice?

Alice: I haven't, but I was just thinking as you were discussing, I've spent quite a lot of time looking at the PDF copies of tribunal, employment tribunal records. Uh, which was for a previous job where we were trying to determine the kind of key themes and issues arising in employment tribunals.

And I have to say, it's an area that is in much need of digitisation [Jan and Paul laugh] because looking through reams and reams of PDFs takes a lot of time, but was, was really, really interesting, actually.

Paul: I'm really glad you clarified that you were doing that for work. [Alice laughs] Uh, I had a dreadful moment where I thought that's how you spent your Saturday afternoons. Sat there, what can I do today? I know I'm gonna look through the records of lots of old employment tribunals. [Alice laughs]

But I am glad to hear you've never been called before one. Neither has Jan, which is even more surprising to me, but there we go.

Um, can you tell us a little bit, Alice, to start with, about your background and why you are motivated to work in this whole area around better work in the UK?

Alice: Yes, of course. So, growing up in Manchester in the 1990s, I would say I've had my fair share of poor quality jobs, um, whether that was in retail, hospitality, Saturday jobs, you know the kind of story, just very insecure, low paid, et cetera.

Um, but I would say after going on to study philosophy and critical theory at university and, and taking that to postgraduate level as well, I really got interested in the topic of inequality, and why some people seem to be winning all of the time and others seem to be losing all of the time.

And I went on actually to work for the, uh, the Consumers Association, which, um, where I was focusing on the rights of people who were experiencing problem debt. And it was from there I got really interested in employment rights, actually, because I, I really realised that this was the place where so many people were spending so much of their time, um, to earn the money, you know, to live off or to pay themselves out of debt.

And that in the cases of the, the people I was working with, and it was a really, work in general is a really kind of critical meeting point, point I think between us as individuals and us as part of a bigger economic system. And for that reason it feels like a really kind of important point of influence, um, if we care about inequality.

So from there, I went on to work as the Head of Work and Pay at the New Economics Foundation, which is a thinktank looking at a number of different themes affecting the economy. Um, and I got to work with some fantastic organisations. I worked a lot with trade unions actually in the manufacturing sector who were campaigning for shorter working hours.

Uh, I worked with women who were in low paid self-employment who were banding together to think about how to improve security in their jobs. I worked with some private hire drivers up in Leeds and Bradford who were pushing back, at that time, against the excesses of their new boss, uh, which happened to be Uber, in the early days.

Uh, and all of this I found absolutely fascinating and really sort of emboldened me to carry on working on employment rights. I went into the private sector for a bit and worked on behalf of institutional investors. So pension funds, primarily, who wanted to ensure their shareholdings weren't being invested in companies that were exploiting workers. They wanted to sort of use their

shares for good, so to speak, and, and leverage them to improve working conditions in their supply chains.

And then that brought me to the Work Foundation, and that's the role that I'm doing now and getting to work on some really fascinating interest, um, research and policy topics here.

Jan: And can you remind our listeners what is the Work Foundation and what is, what its focus is?

Alice: Yeah, so we are a policy and research unit, uh, focused on improving working lives across the UK. So we're part of the fantastic Management School here at Lancaster University, but we are mostly actually based in London. And we conduct research into insecure jobs. For example, zero hours contracts, the gig economy, temporary and agency jobs. Uh, the role of labour market intermediaries. So, uh, recruitment agencies for example.

Uh, we're also quite interested in the interrelation of work and health. So, uh, the role of employers in actually supporting good health and, and good population health. Um, and also looking at the role of, of government in general, local government, national governments, in improving working conditions and, and protections in work.

Paul: Yes. Um, long time listeners will remember that we had the Work Foundation Director Ben Harrison, with us, um, a couple of years ago talking about, particularly, work on insecure work, which is one of the, um, areas you mentioned there, it's a really interesting topic.

Moving on to work that's going on at the minute then, and the relevance of, um, employment rights that we mentioned briefly before. What are the major issues at the moment around workers' rights here in the UK?

Alice: Yeah, so I, I'd say insecurity is a big one. It's, you've mentioned there, my colleague has, has talked to you about already, um, for almost half a century now, I would say work has been getting more insecure or it's kind of plateaued at a level of insecurity that we're, we're all now accustomed to.

And what I mean by that is that, um, we go off to work, in some cases, without real assurances over the protections that we have in that job. Uh, maybe we don't know exactly how much we're gonna get paid month on month because we don't have guaranteed hours. Maybe we don't have many protections from, uh, redundancy or dismissal, because we are employed in a very, sort of

casual way and we don't have the correct status that would afford us those protections.

And so that's a kind of big issue of insecurity. And we measure that around one in five people in work are actually in a severely insecure job. Um, but I would say there are some, some other issues as well that, that do relate to this. So, so work and health is, is something I, I mentioned we're focusing on at the moment.

And what we've really seen, um, largely since the pandemic actually, or, or at least the pandemic shone a light on it, but I think some of these trends actually predated the pandemic. Was that we were seeing people leaving the labour market in increasing numbers for health reasons and this is for a myriad of, of reasons really.

It's, it's to do with population health and, and kind of difficulties there, or declines to some extent in the length of our healthy working lives. So we're, we're sort of becoming unwell at an earlier point in our lives, and that's affecting our ability to work.

Some of it is related to mental health as well, and people's sort of increased, um, problems with, with mental health and, and the interactions that have that has with work, particularly when we have quite intense work lives now, and not many boundaries between, uh, home life and work life often thanks to, you know, phones, digitisation.

Um, yeah, so I'd say that there's some of the big themes that, that we've been working on recently. I think a, a big one, um, currently is actually unemployment. So it's less that people are leaving the labour market because they're too unwell to work, but it's that some of those people are actually now actively looking for work and would really like to get into a job, but the jobs aren't there.

And we're seeing that that's affecting young people in particular at the moment. And it's a, it's a big worry for that group because if you spend time out of work as a young person that can have kind of knock-on consequences across your, your working life.

Jan: In your description of some of these big trends, it becomes evident that work and the nature of work changes over time. So I wonder if you could help

our listeners understand how workers' rights have changed over the last 20 years or so.

Alice: Yeah, sure. Well, actually, interestingly, I'd say workers' rights haven't changed a huge amount over the last 20 years. And that's part of the problem because working practices and business practices have changed, and so rights haven't, uh, necessarily kept pace with that.

So I think we've seen a, sort of, increased fragmentation of workplaces, again, thanks to digitisation and, and various platforms that allow employers to really, um, sort of chop up jobs into, into small parts and dish them out to, to workforces that maybe can do them most cheaply.

Whether those workforces are abroad or, or maybe in a different part of the UK or, or, or using digital platforms so that they're sort of not fully employed, but they're hired to do piece work as, as a self-employed contractor. Um, and some, you know, that's, that's been happening for, for many decades, but I'd say in the last 20 years, those practices have, have, um, increased and maybe become normalised.

You know, outsourcing is, is a very normal process now for most public sector bodies and, and has been for a while. So in local government, you'll have various services actually carried out by, by private companies.

Um, and all of that has, I suppose, posed some problems for workers' rights. Because it's not always clear for people who their bosses, who their actual employer is. You know, they might be dealing with one person on their payslip, but actually it's another company that they're getting their HR information from, and they don't really know where to turn, uh, to deal with a problem that might be occurring.

Uh, so I'd say that that general kind of ambiguity around working practices and who your boss is, is something that that's really become an issue in the last 20 years. I'd say there have been some changes, and this is not talking about the Employment Rights Act yet, which is, you know, the big, the big change that sort of came in at the end of last year and, and will be flowing through over the next few years.

I'd say prior to that there were, there were some small tweaks that happened. Um, you might recall the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices back in 2017 that made recommendations, uh, to strengthen employment rights in a

number of areas. Uh, this, governments that came after that did, did make a few of those changes, for example, around, uh, rights for agency workers and some small tweaks to zero hours contracts rules.

But I would say the Employment Rights Act is really the first thing we've seen of its kind for a long time. In, in my professional career working on this area, it's the first time there's been a major piece of legislation to actually change workers' rights.

Paul: Right, so let's get to the heart of it then. What is the Employment Rights Act from 2025? And I think you've probably already covered why it was necessary, but if there was any other reasons why it was necessary too.

Alice: Yeah. So the Employment Rights Act is, uh, a piece of legislation that looks to introduce new securities, new protections for workers to bring working practices, uh, up to speed with the modern day. So I would say it does actually take, uh, quite a lot of, sort of, influence and elements from the Taylor Review that I mentioned.

Um, but it has come through under the Labour government, under a kind of wider agenda that they termed, uh, Make Work Pay. And I'd say the overarching ambition of the changes is to improve security at work, ensure that more people know what they're going to be earning at the end of a month after they've, they've gone off, um, to work.

Uh, so, a kind of, I suppose, poster child for, for some of these changes, um, is the ban on zero hours contracts, which I can talk a bit more about if, if you're sort of interested about, interested in that. Uh, but there are other protections as well that are being brought in around that kind of ambition of making work more secure.

The act also looks to codify flexible working and people's, um, ability to access flexible working on day one, which was already a right, um, predating this change. But what the Act will attempt to do is to make flexible working, uh, more of a norm. So it's an assumed right, that, that, uh, the, the burden really is then on the employer to, to push back if, if it isn't suitable for, for that, um, workplace at the time.

And there's a raft of other changes within there as well, which I can get into as, as we discuss.

Jan: So let's start thinking about some of those provisions of the Act, and maybe we, if we start with zero hour contracts, and then I'll let you maybe bring up two or three other examples that, that fit within, uh, a sort of a decent work thinking about how work might pay.

Alice: Yes. So with zero hours contracts, it's quite an interesting one because we've heard a lot about, um, this ambition to ban them. However, they don't currently actually exist in any legal form now anyway. [short laugh]

There's no sort of contract called the zero hours contract. It tends to just refer to the absence of any agreed hours of work. And that's been, I think part of the reason it seems to have, have been so difficult to legislate around and, and we've, you know, talked about this on and off for over a decade now, and I think there's a general public consensus that on the whole, these contracts aren't offering people the security they need.

I think there are, um, some cases in which they seem to, to be fine and work well, for example, if people are kind of opting into them alongside full-time studies, for example, and they, they want that, that kind of high level of flexibility.

But from our research and, and the research of lots of other organisations, we found that actually they're being quite, that they're being misused and that in many cases people are actually just working a regular full-time job and should have a contract to reflect that.

So what the Act will seek to do is to provide people with a new right. And that right will be to a guaranteed hours contract. And how they actually deliver that is subject of debate, still, at the moment, it's gonna require some secondary legislation. So this change won't come into play for at least another year, uh, possibly longer.

But broadly what, what will probably happen is there will be a reference period of 12 weeks and, depending on your working hours over those 12 weeks, you will then earn the right to have a contract that reflects those working hours. Um, and that, in theory will, will ban exploitative zero hours contracts.

Paul: What about other areas? One that particularly got in the news, um, when the Act was in its final stages of being drafting, was about, uh, unfair dismissal and the right to claim unfair dismissal.

I think originally it was gonna be from day one, uh, if I remember. And then that's been pushed out a little bit to now, is it 60 days?

Alice: Uh, six months...

Paul: ...six months, sorry...

Alice: ...yeah, at the moment, yeah. So, yes, you're right. This has been debated a lot. So currently, uh, people gain those rights after two years in a job. It used to be a year, and then that was, uh, increased to two years under a previous government.

So this is a bit of a football one, I would say, [laughs] that gets sort of kicked back and forth depending on the sentiment of the government and power at the time. Um, so yes, it's been, we've, sort of, settled on six months, um, for now.

So what that means is that, uh, a whole raft of workers who currently had, had no real protection from, from redundancy or dismissal in some cases, um, will now have those protections there. So it's not to say an employer can't, you know, terminate somebody's contract, but there will be additional protections there, uh, after six months, which everyone seems to be sort of happy with as, as a kind of negotiated point in the middle, I think. Um, but yes, there, there has been a lot of debate on that one.

Um, so one that is just coming in this month is the reforms to Statutory Sick Pay. So these will, this, this change will affect low income workers in particular, and the change is that, uh, there will no longer be a three day waiting period for people to qualify for statutory sickness pay.

For those who don't know what, what SSP is, it's the minimum payment that an employer is, is legally obliged to pay to somebody if they are off work and sick. Um, I think for a lot of people, for example, ourselves working in higher education, we don't actually have to worry about that too much because our employers have an occupational sick pay policy that generally is much better than the statutory measure.

The, the statutory amount is, is actually very low. Uh, for most people it represents less than a day's work. And so what the changes, uh, will do is they'll just ensure that those people on the lowest incomes can afford to take a day off if they're unwell.

Jan: They seem all very sensible things. So is, do you think the act does enough, or do you think there's still some, some additional elements of workers' rights that ought to be pursued and, and maybe will be pursued in the fullness of time as well?

Alice: Yeah, I mean, it's a really good question and, and sometimes it's easy to get bogged down in the weeds of, and the details of these changes, and forget the big picture. And I think one of the commitments that the government made was to review employment status as part of this, this big Make Work Pay agenda.

The reason being that we currently have quite a complicated system whereby we have, uh, employees and then we have an interim sort of, uh, status of, of workers who are sometimes referred to as dependent contractors. Uh, and then we have the self-employed.

And, there is one concern that, uh, with the improved rights that are coming through the Employment Rights Act, there might be more of an incentive for employers to go towards either self-employment, or the kind of interim worker status, as a way to sidestep some of these rules.

So, for example, we're already seeing retailers, so high street shops, using gig work platforms to recruit shop floor staff, uh, because they can, [laughs] and, and they, you know, they don't have to worry then about the Employment Rights Act.

So I would say there's, there's maybe a bit of a, um, a missed opportunity here to deal with that, that broader issue about, you know, employment status and what is the right way to, to employ someone. I think the government does still intend to do that, but it's, it's been delayed. So, there's a concern that, yeah, we're gonna see some displacement of insecurity happening in the meantime.

Uh, and then just back on the, the question I suppose of the big picture, something we're quite interested in at the Work Foundation is this question of sustainable working lives. And actually we're working with, um, an academic, Stavroula Leka, uh, also from Lancaster University, who, does a lot of work on psychosocial risks at work and sustainable employment.

And what she means by that is ensuring that jobs are actually sustainable over a lifetime and that people don't burn out, and that people are able to, to

actually stay in an, in a healthy employment relationship for, you know, as long as, a long period as, as they want to or need to.

Um, and I think something maybe then for the government to look at would be what are our rights to time off across our lifetime, to enable us to have these healthier, longer working lives? So that might be looking at improved parental leave, improved paid leave for carers, because we know more and more, uh, people have responsibility, caring responsibilities for loved ones, for partners, for parents, for other family members.

And there is a right, uh, now for people to take up to five days off, unpaid, to act as carers. We think probably we need to be more ambitious on that, and we should be looking at, uh, a right to paid time off to be a carer, um, as you would have paid time off to be a parent, for example. And looking at other ways to, I suppose, build in some breathing space into working lives, so that people, you know, when they have a big life event, whether it's becoming a parent or becoming a carer or having a health shock themselves, so that they don't have to leave the labour market altogether. So that actually work can be an accommodating place for them and they can come back to work when they're ready.

Um, I think that is something that, an area that the government is interested in, it hasn't made its way into the Employment Rights Act in this moment, but maybe it will be a focus for future activity.

Paul: Which brings me to my next point. Is there other legislation that might be coming, that might be being developed, that might not yet be being thought of, but might happen in future, that will complement the Employment Rights Act to create a greater whole to help protect workers' rights?

Alice: Yeah, I think definitely that piece about employment status. Um, I think particularly looking at people in low-paid self-employment in the gig economy, and looking at whether there is a, kind of, social safety net that we can establish for those workers so that we don't get this discrepancy between, you know, individuals taking on all the risks themselves in their employment relationship. Uh, so I think, yeah, I think that will definitely be an area of focus.

I think, uh, with the advent of AI and the increased use of AI across, you know, all of our working lives in various different ways, which could be a whole podcast in itself, and I'm, [Paul laughs] I'm sure that's a topic that interests you. Um, but I think something to keep in mind there, or something that interests

me, is whether, or how we can think about the gains to workers that might come from AI use.

So rather than just thinking about the efficiencies and the increased profits that that might be available for businesses, can we also think about, uh, more time off and better work life balance for people? You know, if this is gonna be a major industrial transition of our generation, can we design it in a way that actually benefits lots of people, not just those who are lucky enough to, you know, deploy it in their company at the right time and, and gain efficiencies from it.

So yes, I think that would be a really interesting area for the, the government to think more about.

Jan: And maybe just as a wee side explainer, many of our listeners would've heard the phrase 'gig economy', but might not know exactly what it means. So, but before we move on, we're gonna do a wee magic, uh, briefing on what is the gig economy. Alice, over to you.

Alice: Yes, sure. So, yeah, the gig economy, it's a term not everyone likes, but we've all got quite used to it now. It generally refers to, uh, self-employment whereby people are given gigs. So, uh, short term jobs in exchange for money. They're generally not employed. Uh, it's people bidding for bits of work, carrying out that bit of work, and often it's mediated by a digital platform.

So I think probably some of the most common examples people know of would be Uber, Deliveroo. Uh, but actually we see these forms of gig work platforms existing in lots of other sectors too, maybe less talked about, for example, in social care.

So you might have a carer who delivers care to a number of clients mediated through a platform, and that care worker is self-employed and she will go onto the platform, scroll, look for a gig, a.k.a. someone to care for, and will go off and do that job and receive payment for it.

The reason it's so controversial is, is partly due to that ambiguity around that, whether that person is employed or not. Uh, and often we've seen the gains go to the owner of the platforms, you know, the Ubers, the Deliveroos of the world, rather than the, the gig workers themselves.

Jan: I think there's gonna be a, a gig, gig economy built around podcasting...
[Jan and Paul laugh]

Paul: ...gig economy...

Jan: ...here's a topic. [laughs]

Paul: Are you going to start doing hundreds of other podcasts, just wherever the money is? Is this it? You're gonna give up on academia, just see if you can find a few more podcasts to do...?

Jan: ...ah, I expect my current job, while it does attempt on a virtually continuous basis to burn me out, is probably better paid than a podcast gig. [laughs]

Paul: Yes. Yeah, I, I suspect you might struggle to find too many other podcast vacancies for accounting academics.

Jan: Steady on. I'm gonna pass the questioning back to you and not talk to you again.

Paul: Okay. That's fair enough. Um, one of the things that the Employment Rights Act has created is the Fair Work Agency.

Can you tell us, Alice, what that is and what it does, or will do?

Alice: Yes, so the Fair Work Agency, I think is a really positive element of the Employment Rights Act. So, it is a combined enforcement body. So, it is an attempt by the government to bring a number of existing labour market enforcement functions under one roof, one virtual roof.

I don't yet know if everyone's gonna sit in the office together [short laugh], because I think people tend to work all over the UK in different offices. But some of the functions that will be brought under the same roof will be the parts of HMRC that deal with national minimum wage underpayment. So finding the companies who aren't paying the legal minimum wage to their staff. Uh, it will also include, uh, the bodies that look at recruitment agencies and the practices of recruitment agencies, particularly where these are exploitative.

And the Fair Work Agency itself will have some strengthened and, and new functions and, and capacities as well. For example, it will have the power to initiate enforcement activities on behalf of workers, rather than waiting for individual claims to be brought forth or brought forward, the Fair Work Agency will have the ability to actually go looking for, labour abuses and, and take claims on, on behalf of a group of workers.

Uh, some of the details are still being fleshed out as to how it will work and indeed how it will be resourced. Because I think the ambition of the agency is, is big, which is brilliant, and I know that, Matthew Taylor, who's going to be, uh, heading it up initially is very keen that it becomes something that even people in the street know the name of.

I think at the moment, if you asked a, a regular person who enforces employment rights in the UK, they wouldn't really know. And I think the aim is that people eventually will have heard of the Fair Work Agency and will know that this organisation's on their side. Whether it's gonna be resourced sufficiently to be able to, you know, realise its ambitions, I think is, is another question.

Uh, I do know it's gonna be very interested in using, uh, technology and digital capacities to actually investigate cases of, uh, or enforcement breaches and, and non-compliance. Uh, which I think could be quite exciting because, you know, we do have a lot of data out there, and I think it would be good to use it for these, these types of positive and, and progressive purposes.

Jan: And I like the label, fair work. So I mean, it, it kind of, I mean, there must be ways of defining it, which, which you, you might be able to tell us about, but it's something that actually anyone can hear and think, yes, I like that. I, I can see what that would be. I can see what unfair work is, and we don't want to do that.

So is there any way of defining what fair work is?

Alice: Yeah, I think that's a good question. I, I don't think the Fair Work Agency itself will be defining it, though I think it's interesting to look at their areas of focus, um, which give us some clues.

So they are going to be looking, in addition to minimum wages, they're going to be looking at holiday pay, access to holiday pay, access to sickness pay and, and other areas like that.

So I think you could, you could take from that, fair work is a job that pays you enough to live off, but also gives you time off from work to, to rest and recuperate.

Um, I think a key part of it really is ensuring workers themselves have enough agency as well, and have voice in the workplace. And I think, uh, that one of the main ways that that workers can do this is through trade unions. And I

know that the Fair Work Agency's very keen to, to work as part of a, an ecosystem of enforcement, really, that will include trade unions, it will include civil society bodies, you know, citizens advice, um, organisations that are supporting very vulnerable groups.

Uh, and I think as part of that, hopefully will have a shared understanding of a fair work and more clout, I suppose, uh, to be able to actually, you know, realise that for more, more people.

Paul: So drawing us to a close then, Alice. What do you think comes next when it comes to the work agenda and what needs to change in the near future?

Alice: Yeah, so I think we are probably gonna see a devolution of some of the responsibility for fair work over to, uh, local governments, combined authorities. I think there's a sense that the Employment Rights Act now sets a new bar. Well, as it comes in, you know, it's gonna take a couple of years to really take hold.

Uh, but it sets a new minimum floor to some extent. So then the question becomes how can we improve beyond that? And I think there's some great ambitions coming out of, um, whether it's Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the West Midlands, others, that are looking to really up the game on what good work looks like beyond those minimum standards.

And I think, uh, proactive employers are doing the same as well. And I, I think that's really exciting. I think there's kind of more opportunity, hopefully, for workforces and employers to also negotiate their own working conditions as well, um, through, through trade unions and through, um, constructive negotiation.

I think that hopefully we're entering a new era for that. There are some changes in the Employment Rights Act that enable, uh, workers to more easily, you know, collectivise their voice as part of a trade union. And I think that that could, um, hopefully generate some more proactive negotiations between employers and, and workers in, in key sectors.

Paul: Well, we very much look forward to seeing what does happen in the coming years. Thank you very much for filling us in on the whole area of employment rights, Alice Martin.

Alice: No problem. It's been lovely to chat to you both.

[Theme music]

Paul: It's good to see, isn't it, Jan? That there are positive changes being made when it comes to workers' rights here in the UK?

Jan: And what I, one of the aspects of what Alice was talking about that I found very engaging is, like, sustainable working lives.

Like we're gonna work longer, for sure. Uh, we kind of know that 'cause there's the retirement age opens up, but at the same time and sort of really drawing from, uh, Killian and, and, uh, Leanne's podcast, we are going to maybe suffer ill health or we're gonna have caring responsibilities for somebody in our family.

And so being able to navigate all of that complexity and keep having a job, a job that, you know, pays appropriately, et cetera, was really important. So it's quite a holistic picture that she was, that Alice was talking about,

Paul: And, but sustainable also from the psychosocial side of it, whereby you're in a job that *feels* good. You're not in a job where you've no idea what's going to happen, where you've got ill-defined responsibilities, where you've got leaders who could ask you to do anything at any time and you don't know what that's gonna be.

Or where there's no definitive leadership structure and therefore you are struggling to know [laughs] who you're expected to listen to and what you're expected to do...

Jan: ...yeah...

Paul: ...there's, yeah, so, so much there. And it's good to see that what Alice said about the fact that the Employment Rights Act is looking to improve security of jobs for people, especially when that figure at the very start, one in five people in the UK are in insecure work.

So if this is actively benefiting 20% of the workforce, then that's got to be a good thing, even if, as Alice said, maybe it doesn't quite go far enough in certain areas, and there's other things that still need to be done.

Jan: And I think it's also that whole sort of cost benefit calculation as well, and, and trust me as an accountant to, to think about that. But if you put the worker at the centre, then actually insecure work is lousy.

But I would've thought if you put the business at the centre, um, creating an insecure working environment will have its own costs as well...

Paul: ...mm-hmm...

Jan: ...and actually to be a good employer ought to pay. And being a responsible employer ought to be one of those things that, that you aspire to. And I'm sure many, many businesses do, but clearly some don't.

Paul: Now call me a cynic, looking at costs. Alice, towards the end there mentioned the fact that maybe in the future that a lot of the responsibility for this kind of thing is gonna be devolved to local government.

Now, I don't like to say that local government's already overstretched in terms of what it can do with its budgets, but I'd hope that they get money to be able to do this, if it's on local authorities that are expected to do it. Because then otherwise it becomes something that, it's not seen as a key res, or a key priority for these local authorities.

They're gonna say, well, we've got to look after the roads, we've got to social care, we've got special educational needs, et cetera, things like this. That's where our priorities need to be because that's where people expect our priorities to be, we haven't got time for this.

And it might be the only, say the combined authorities like Manchester, like the West Midlands, et cetera, that have greater budgetary allowances, are able to say, yeah, actually, we can do that because we've got the greater responsibility anyway. So that would be my fear if it does get devolved to all levels of local government.

Jan: I am really pleased you mentioned Manchester. So what we'll put in the show notes is information about something called Manchester's Good Employment Charter. And it's, it's been really interesting to know some, a little bit about that.

Uh, 'cause uh, the Pentland Centre's been working in this area a little bit, um, whereby there's a set of, uh, employer expectations. And the Manchester Combined Authority has helped employers sign up to that and to build their capability to be sound employers.

But you're right at some of the, and there are equivalent, um, charters elsewhere in the UK, but it is the bigger, bigger authorities that are doing it. But their experience and their knowledge and knowhow, hopefully we'll be able to translate into other areas as well...

Paul: ...mmm...

Jan: ...because people work in a place. So place-based...

Paul: ...yes...

Jan: ...support is also, is important...

Paul: ...it, it does make sense. I just worry there'd be a two-tier system whereby combined authorities are able to better cope with this, 'Cause they've got the bigger structures, and other smaller local authorities aren't able to do it.

Or the government says, actually yeah, we're gonna give it to combined authorities. And then you've got central government dealing with all the other ones...

Jan: ...yeah, yeah...

Paul: ...so, yeah. Well, we'll keep our eye on that and see how it works.

Jan: And I guess with the, uh, Employment Rights Act being so new and the Fair Work Agency also being new, this is an area where we should definitely keep our podcast eyes on and, um, come back and talk about at some stage in the future as well.

Paul: Yeah, because as Alice has pointed out, a lot of it hasn't been enacted yet. It was brought into law late 2025, but it takes time for everything to go through all the processes that Acts need to go through before they're enacted actively - how many different variations [Jan laughs] of the word act can you use in a sentence - so that people are affected by it?

Jan: Yes. I think you're acting out now...

Paul: ...I'm always acting up, but never, I dunno about acting out...

Jan: [laughing] ...anyway, anyway, I think we've, we've maybe come to the end of this particular discussion.

Paul: Yes. What are we gonna be discussing next time, Jan?

Jan: Uh, planetary health.

Paul: Planetary health.

Jan: Yeah.

Paul: Ah, so not the health of workers and psychosocial health, but planetary health.

Jan: Which may indeed include the health of workers, but so, we'll have to wait and see.

Paul: Yes. Well, I look forward to that. We're gonna be discussing that with Professor Jemilah Mahmood from Sunway University, our friends at Sunway over in Malaysia, so that will be next time.

Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner,

Jan: And from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]