



***Simon's
story:***
**The truth about
agency employment
in the United Kingdom**

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ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

Simon's story

Introduction

Agency working is being used to undercut terms of employment, allowing employers to side-step employment laws, and spreading casualisation and hardship say unions.

Ahead of the second reading of a bill that would ensure agency workers and directly employed staff are treated equally, a Unite officer has been working 'undercover' to experience life firsthand as one of the country's emerging class of vulnerable workers.

His time as an agency worker has revealed an insecure world of work of two-tier labour forces, of misleading job ads, little or no training for agency workers, and promises of permanent employment from agencies that evaporate in the workplace.

And far from providing a gateway into direct employment the "mystery worker" found that agencies exert a vice-like grip on employment deciding who will and will not be interviewed, which may be allowing some companies to bypass anti-discrimination laws.

Mystery agency worker Simon spent six weeks working on agency contracts in the Midlands, in and around the constituency of employment minister Pat McFadden. Simon, married with two young children, a former union rep and skilled manufacturing worker, was left shaken by his experiences of the 'hire and fire' culture.

Thursday 10th January 2008

First day as an agency worker. I set up an interview with X employment agency. Meeting them later.

Meanwhile, I had an appointment with the senior shop steward at a local food plant. She informed me about the agency that they used and issues they had. One of those issues arose when an agency worker collapsed at work. It was discovered the workers were actually doing two shifts, one at this plant and one elsewhere. Their combined hours amounted to fifteen hours a day shifts. This was instantly jumped on by our steward who held the agency and the company at fault.

Returned to Derby for my agency interview. I filled out my application form and completed their entrance test, they then asked me to sign my contract of employment. It was one page long and the wording on it was set at the smallest font size. I would say that it was even smaller than the smallest setting on my PC.

When trying to read it I was made to feel that I was wasting time with the receptionist tutting at me. I then asked if I could have a copy of the contract and was told point blank NO. I had to refrain from giving myself away by arguing the point.

While reading the contract two Polish workers came in to ask why their wages were wrong yet again - whole shifts were missing out of their wages. When the receptionist left to check up on their complaint I began to speak to them, explaining that I was just signing up and asking them what they were like to work for. They told me I would be ok as long as I didn't disagree with them (the agency) and because I was English I would get work quite easily.





When the receptionist returned I told her that I was fresh back from my aunt's business in Majorca which explained my one year gap. I also stated that I was only in the country for a couple of months before I go back to Majorca. My plan was to earn as much cash as possible and asked if they could guarantee me enough work for a couple of months. They informed me once they had seen a copy of my passport I could start work next week as there was plenty of work.

I then returned home.

Friday 11th January 2008

Went to regional office and had meeting with organising department to highlight some agencies that they had come into contact with. One agency that seemed very bad was XXY so I have arranged to register with them, they have promised to send me to one of their poultry sites in West Bromwich.

One difficulty that was potentially going to be an obstacle for me was that the really bad agencies very rarely employ white British workers, they prefer to employ Asian or migrant workers presumably due to the fact they are the most vulnerable parts of the community.

Monday 14th January 2008

Travelled south to meet a worker who agreed to become a member and help us to communicate with other Hungarian workers - as long as his membership was secret.

He informed us that he had been working at ABC since 2005 and that he had never registered with the Home Office (Workers Registration Scheme) as was told was not important. He told us of his accommodation that he pays £35.00 per week and shares a three bedroomed terraced house with 10 other people.

When he first arrived in UK he had to pay £350 administration fee and £3 to have his cheques cashed. When I asked about the work at ABC his first response was how dangerous it was to work there, especially on one machine that is designed to cut through frozen meat. Many people receive cuts off this machine to the hands. He tells me the British workers enter accidents in a book whereas the migrant workers are given £30 or £40 for lost time and don't enter the accidents in the book.

When I asked him how many workers would be willing to talk to me, his response was one of fear. The gangmaster, who is known to me from his abuse of workers in Burton now lives in near this site on the south coast. He intimidates the workers and has been known to use acts of violence. Just over a week ago this guy assaulted a young woman in a disco in the town: "he broke her face, there was blood everywhere". I cannot verify whether this is a true account or story put round to maintain the fear within that community.

My greatest concerns are for those workers as the fear I saw not only with the workers in the south coast plant but also with the people who travelled with me was unbelievable. The majority of the workers I saw were all in there 20s, very shy, nervous people with no or very little English language skills.

Tuesday 15th January 2008

On returning from the south coast, I visited the workers from another case who are all working for agencies. They were telling me of the problems such as working for one maybe two days then no work, only earning enough to pay bills. They also told me that no-one ever asks them about registration and if they ever ask they are put off the subject. When they sign up to an agency the documents are very hard to understand. Pat who has a good understanding of English even struggled to tell me what forms he had to sign.



I then went to see an interpreter we sometimes use, who is very close to these workers. She informed me of a group of workers that have arrived in Burton from Hungary. They came expecting to be paid £400 per week and now have all resigned when it became apparent what they had been promised in Hungary was not true and that they would not earn anywhere near £400.

These workers were brought over by a major UK food agency called to work in a turkey factory. They had been brought to the UK through a company in Hungary, set up by a relative of TS (an illegal gangmaster who has been bringing in migrant workers to England for this agency).

When they were interviewed the workers were promised good wages and good accommodation. They were very unhappy when they saw where they had to live and the work they had to do. Then they were informed of the wages they would be paid which was nowhere near what they had been promised. I spoke to them just before they returned back to Hungary. They felt very let down and unhappy.

Wednesday 16th January 2008

Today I visited four more agencies.

Every agency I went to displayed advertisements of immediate start work and excellent rates of pay. After you have registered they inform you that things are slow and there is very little work at the moment, they take your number and promise to call you when work is available. This can take days or weeks before you get a call and then it might be only a couple of days work. In the case of some of the workers I spoke to they got 4 hours work over 2 days in the last month.

I have only done this for a few days but I already feel demoralised waiting and checking for my phone to ring.

As an experiment I went to one major agency with two Hungarian lads who were also looking for work. We all asked if we could register. The two Hungarian lads were asked if they have transport. When they said their car was broke they were told to come back when they had a car. I was asked what sort of work I did and I told them I used to be a machine operator in steel factory. I was asked for a CV and told that they could possibly have some permanent positions for me starting at £18,000. I gave them my email to which I have attached what they sent me.

The thing that struck me as odd was if there is very little work why were they still registering workers, which made me think about how many workers do they have on their books and how does this compare to how many placements they have to supply? How do they allocate who gets which work? Is there a maximum number of workers they can put on their books at any one time?

Friday 18th January 2008

Started work at plastics firm which supplies companies with finished products. They receive and make plastic components for various companies, then assemble them into a finished product to be sent to the customer.

The company was split over several places on the industrial estate, the workforce comprised of mainly British workers using bigger machines and doing more skilled jobs. In the area I worked, which was very much less skilled, the workforce was made up mainly of agency workers, mostly migrant workers. We were not really allowed access to the other areas of the plant. We were not allowed to leave our stations unless it was to fetch more work. There were no canteen facilities provided so we even had to have our break at our workstations. If you smoked then you were allowed to go outside to have a cigarette.

14:00: I was told I was to be put on a machine by the manager. The machine has a hot spike that heats brass pins and puts them in plastic back boxes for screws to go into later. This spike gets very hot yet there was no guarding, no Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). I was shown what to do just once and left to get on with it. This is pretty much standard



practice with agency workers and there is very little concern shown to them. If an agency worker stops to talk to someone they are immediately told to get back to work. The very few directly employed workers there are constantly talking to each other and tend to look down on the agency workers, especially migrant workers. I seem to be more acceptable to them.

Halfway through the shift, I was placed on a machine in another room all on my own because I can be trusted. I had to tap holes in plastic back boxes and was pretty much left alone for the rest of the night. Again, I received no training and had very little PPE except the toe protectors I was wearing - which I had supplied myself.

When I asked about PPE I was told I can purchase it from the agency, which was true as I had seen the notice in their office. I asked for more hours to see how favoured I was as overtime is not allowed for the agency staff and was told next week so will have to see if they allow it. One of the supervisors did tell me that agency staff who work there for 13 weeks would be offered permanent employment. When I asked how many times that had happened he told never as of yet; nobody gets beyond 12 weeks work as they simply are not offered the work.

I was paid £5.62 an hour here. I was told that if I lost any hours during the week, even if this was for sickness, the rate would drop back to £5.52 (the national minimum wage). It didn't sound as if it would ever be put back up again.

Monday 21st January 2008

After arriving in Derby the previous night I stopped at a B&B. It was a tiny little room with damp on the walls, paint peeling off, a TV that only had two channels, a shared bathroom with no curtains and rooms adjacent for all to see. It made me feel quite low and having seen some of the accommodation the migrant workers I had helped it also made me aware how they must have felt.

I reported to work at 08:00 where I was told to use a heat spike machine again. Yet again I had no gloves, safety glasses or any PPE. After about a couple of hours I did burn my hands as I caught them on the spike trying to put the brass inserts in. I was asked if I could continue as it didn't look bad. I told them I could so I was just sent back to work, no accident book report, no first aid. I spoke to one of the employees about raising a hazard report. They looked at me with blank expression as they had never heard of hazard reporting and thought I was taking the mickey when I started talking about reporting near misses.

I asked the manager if it was possible for me to do more hours as I needed the money, but she told me that she could not authorise that, so I decided I should contact my agency to see if they had some part time work for me. They didn't have at the moment but if they got any it would go my way.

I spoke to some of my colleagues from the agency to see what their views were of the work they do. They told me about the pay constantly being wrong, missing hours, sometimes they only get half a day's work which has to last them a week or longer. Their opinion of this factory was that it was good place to work as other places were dangerous and they were treated very badly.

This shows how bad things had got; to me this factory was a health and safety nightmare. I had also witnessed the manager shouting at the migrant workers for putting their coats on 2 minutes before the end of the shift, I mean really shouting yet I had my coat on before them and nothing was said to me.

After my shift I returned to my B&B and found that I was starting to get very low. I felt pretty lonely, bored and hungry. I had only taken enough money to pay for the B&B and an extra £20 to live on. I wanted to get a real sense of what it was like to live on very little or no money. I went to shop brought some food, which I had to eat cold as no cooking facilities, and stayed in my little room all night. This was probably the lowest point so far.



Tuesday 22nd January 2008

Went for the last time to the plastics company.

Arrived at 08:00 and started with the heat spike again. Spent the whole morning just doing the same thing and felt there was nothing more I could really learn from this experience.

So at break time made the decision to tell the company it would be my last day. At 14:00 I was told that I was not needed for the rest of the day and was asked to leave.

I went back to my B&B and started to get ready to go. I rang the agency to tell them I would not be returning to the company to which they were not very happy. They let me know in a round about way not to expect anymore work.

Wednesday 23rd January 2008

Spent the morning in Derby with some of the migrant workers I have been helping who are having problems finding work. They were telling me how their lack of English was often an excuse for not being given work. They explained that things were getting desperate for them and how their desire to work was strong.

There seems to me to be a common thread with the migrant workers I have dealt with. They arrive in this country under the impression that there is ready employment. When things either don't work out or the employment finishes (because they are usually very short term contracts) they end up signing up to agencies.

In Derby, a large proportion of migrant workers seem to be signed up to agencies and are being systematically abused by the less reputable ones. The very few 'good agencies' cannot provide work for them as they can not compete in the 'lower end labour market' because they are being undercut by the other agencies. For the workers, it is a vicious circle that is very hard to get out of.

Thursday 24th January 2008

Started to look for proper jobs within my local area. Called Bilston job centre and arranged to go in on Friday. Also went back to my list of local agencies that I could potentially sign up for. There very few agencies in the Bilston area but in the Walsall and West Bromwich areas there are quite a lot. I arranged to go and register. I was told that there was very little work at the moment.

Friday 25th January 2008

Went to Bilston job centre. You have to go on a computerised system to look through all the vacancies. I decided to go for work in a sector in which I have a great deal of experience, the steel industry. There were several jobs advertised. They were offering permanent places for steel slitters so things looked very positive.

I printed off the information and started to call the numbers. The vast majority of the numbers I called were agencies. I had to sign up with them to get an interview so I made appointments with all of them.

One appointment was made for 17:00 that same day, a reflection of the apparent demand for people with my skills.

I arrived at an agency based in Walsall. I was taken into a room and had to fill out the usual forms application, P46, contract etc. The guy interviewing me then explained that they would make every effort to find me some work for me.

I asked about the job that I had originally rang to apply for and was told that he would try to set up an interview for me at the company but first wanted to go through my work history. We



then discussed my 12 years as a steel slitter and my level of experience. It was at this point he became less cautious with me.

He told me how busy they were and how they had to vet potential applicants, but he was delighted with my experience and felt very positive for me. I asked him why the company did not just employ direct? Why the need for agencies? He told me it was to save money and time and it was more cost effective than to recruit direct.

I found this very hard to understand as I am very sure the agencies don't do recruitment for nothing. I asked who the company was because up until this point I had no clue, reluctantly he told me the company's name but he was only telling me this as he felt positive they would see me. I then left and waited for the call.

Monday 28th January 2008

Went round the agencies promising permanent work to register. Started with one who again got me to do all the paper work.

Yet again were very cagey when I tried to talk about the position I wanted to apply for. When they saw my experience again they were happy to talk more. They told me that they vetted all applicants for the company and that they would contact the company and see if I was what they were looking for.

This was pretty much the same for the other three agencies I went to. When asked what I have been doing since I was made redundant in 2006 I could not tell them I worked for a union and still do, so I told them that I had simply been living in Majorca with my family. Only one then refused to deal with me as I could not show last three months work history. All the rest were more than happy to continue.

I decided to again ask why the need for agencies to do recruitment? One agent told me that apart from the costs to advertise, and the time to interview loads of candidates, which takes a lot of manpower time to do, the agency were also able to vet all the candidates and just narrow it down to one person to send to the company for interview.

I found this incredible because although it seemed to make perfect sense and seemed reasonable, I could also see how it can potentially be used to avoid all forms of employment law and even the anti-discrimination laws.

It would be quite easy, for example, for a firm to tell an agency "we don't want any women workers". The agency then advertise the job in the job centre, people then ring to apply for that job and turn up to the agency for interview. The agency sign them up as workers and give them contracts as an agency workers and not anything directly to do with the job advertised. Then they vet all applicants and only send one, say a male, that fits the company's criteria. The other applicants are then given other temporary work fulfilling other contracts. The successful applicant then works for an unspecified period of time until the company decide whether or not to take them on as a permanent employee. Obviously then the employee has to wait a further 12 months before they accrue any employment rights.

Eventually I get an interview at the company. I had a very good interview where I was told that I had a very positive chance but if I was successful I would work for the agency for a long period of time and that the plan would be to take me on permanently at some point in the future (unspecified). However the £7.50 per hour that the agency promised is, according to the company, only £7 per hour.

They would let me know tomorrow if I had the job.

Tuesday 29th January 2008

Today I received a call telling me I was successful and that the company wanted me to attend an induction day on Thursday 31 January 2008. I was also told by the agency that I had an interview on the same Thursday for a steel milling company. I asked them if it was possible to arrange it for another day but they told me no.



I also rang round all the other agencies to see if there was any short-term work while I was waiting for jobs to come through. Most of the agencies lie to you, they tell you the person your trying to contact is very busy or out at the moment, until you are the one they want to speak to then it is amazing how fast they become free.

One agent tells me that a company called ISD was very interested in me. He told me a little about the company and asked if I would be interested in an interview and then promised to set one up. Nothing more really happened today. It is very strange having no control of what's going on.

Wednesday 30th January 2008

Heard nothing from any of the agencies. Rang round and everyone is busy. Getting anxious. Very worried about money.

Friday 1st February 2008

The agent called today to set up an interview for Tuesday 05/02/08 at 09:00. I had to go to Buxton to meet a group of Polish workers who told me that they work for agencies placed at a cheese processing plant. They were telling me about how they were treated differently from everyone else and how they felt they were being discriminated against.

I received my second pay slip from the agency that found me the plastics company work - again they had not deducted national insurance and had charged me a 50p admin fee.

Monday 4th February 2008

Spent the day calling my so called agencies but all were very busy. They said they would return my calls which they didn't.

Tuesday 5th February 2008

Went to my interview with a company that specialises in stainless steel. This is a global company mainly based in Spain. I met the manager who took me for a look round the factory.

The first thing I noticed was that the proper PPE was not being worn anywhere and when I questioned this I was told that it was a relaxed place and they were going to look at the situation sometime in the future.

The manager was very proud of how relaxed things were there. We started to talk about the use of agency workers he admitted that they can work there for up to 2 years. He told me that that they were really looking for young blood as it was an up and coming company. He joked about the managing director being younger than him. With the inspection complete he shook my hand told me in confidence the job was mine but had to interview some others as they were already set up.

Wednesday 6th February 2008

I attended the House of Commons to report to MPs on some of the things I had witnessed as an agency worker.

Thursday 7th February 2008

Rang all the agencies. Nobody speaks to me. Again no returned calls.

If I didn't have the interviews I would be feeling very desperate. I am beginning to feel very low. There is very little information given to you. I am even beginning to believe that they are purposely withholding information. Is this to make you feel desperate so that you'll take any old work?



Friday 8th February 2008

Received a phone call today from the agency telling me to start work in Darlaston and wished me good luck. I was to report at 08:00 for my induction.

Apart from this I heard nothing from anyone else. The agencies in Derby have still not contacted me, even though both had said that there was plenty of work.

Monday 11th February 2008

Started in the stainless steel slitting plant. Normally with inductions they are predominately around health and safety, but this was just to get background information on me, then just a quick scoot round the factory to show me where the fire doors, toilets and canteen facilities where.

I was then shown to where I would be working. I had no personal protective equipment issued and had to get on with it. I started to become accustomed to the machinery and was allowed to basically mess and get into all aspects of the machine with the operator happy for me to do so. Fortunately this machine was identical to one that I had operated before so knew how far I could go and what my limitations were. The operator and the company did not know this and only had my word for it. I know it's not unknown for people to exaggerate there CV but I was allowed to just get stuck in.

When I first started in the steel industry it was drummed into me how dangerous the industry was. I had to do training with a fully competent operator. I was not allowed to do anything until an operator felt confident that I could do it safely. I would have to sign a training document giving feed back about my training and an operator with a foreman would have to pass me off as fully trained before I could be left alone to work. Sadly this seems to have only been in this one company of which would very rarely use agency workers as they thought it would be too dangerous for the short time they were there.

This was one of those companies that does not follow such procedures. There were overhead cranes but nobody using hard hats, workers using cranes putting themselves in very dangerous positions while lifting 2 tonne packs, nobody wearing gloves while handling steel, no armlets to protect their wrists, basically an accident waiting to happen.

It was a very relaxed atmosphere and I was not treated badly as an agency worker but I was a young white British male so I think I ticked all the right boxes.

Still, as an agency worker I am on £7 per hour but directly employed workers are on £8-£9ph for doing the same work. They also get overtime, shift allowances and productivity bonuses. As an agency worker I would get none of this.

**NO UNDERCUTTING
NO ABUSE
EQUAL RIGHTS FOR
AGENCY WORKERS
22ND FEBRUARY 2008
BACK THE BILL**