



**Institute for the
Future of Work**

Spotlight report 2

Construction and Covid-19

Are we key workers?

IFOW interviews, April 2020

IFOW is conducting a series of short-insight reports which share the stories and voice of workers throughout Covid-19, to complement statistical stories being told*.

The insight gained will be brought together in a report later this year to reflect on the ways in which the epidemic has presented systemic issues, reframed the conversation about work, and is shaping new demands for building resilience and a future of good work.

This work is funded by a grant from Trust for London and our core funding from the Open Society Foundation.

We have found:

- Construction workers do not feel supported to comply with Covid-19 guidance, or to report health and safety concerns
- Interviewees have observed an inconsistent approach to defining 'key' work
- Moving jobs, agencies and sites is seen as an alternative to furloughing workers
- Longstanding concern about responsibility for adequate PPE has been exacerbated by Covid-19

Health and safety: industry cultures

All interviewees described their experience of Covid-19 in the context of an industry culture in which speaking out about health and safety is stymied. The construction industry has a history of blacklisting cases, in which information about those who voice concerns about health and safety has been maintained by a coalition of organisations and reviewed when construction workers apply for jobs. This has had a resounding impact on the psyche of the sector.

Against this background, interviewees did not feel supported to comply with the Covid-19 health guidance, or report safety concerns, without fear of losing work:

‘The thing is if you don’t do the work someone else will, that’s why they have to shut the sites because otherwise someone else will who’s happy to take the risk’

Crane Driver, 34

Construction workers described management of new risks associated with the coronavirus in this context:

‘They’ve always dismissed people who complain about health and safety, you just get a tap on the shoulder and you’re gone and the next day they’ll have someone else there doing it from the agency. Nothing has changed in 25 years and Covid-19 is just showing that even more now’

Electrician, 60

The original ‘Gig’ economy

Flexibility is core to the construction industry labour market which many describe as ‘the original gig economy’. Construction workers earn on average significantly more than the general population. However, labourers at the ‘bottom’ of the ladder are often on the minimum wage, with a high share of often non-unionised migrant labour.

Interviewees told us that they change jobs, on average, every eight weeks. They described how this ‘piecemeal’ approach to work reduces risks for contractors, while increasing risks for individuals. Asymmetrical risk allocation is now felt more acutely:

‘Firms need to grow and shrink their workforce on demand. They need to be able to shift through seasons, which demands flexibility. Major contractors depend on subcontractors, who depend on agencies, who depend on payroll companies. And it’s the payroll companies that workers have a contractual relationship with. All the risks are pushed down this supply chain. [*This means that*] workers lose out on the benefits and protections that usually come with a job’

Electrician, 29

Interviewees reported the need to use unfamiliar agencies in order to find continuous work. This sense of need has been exacerbated through Covid-19. Moving agencies and sites remains common and, in practice, is treated as an alternative to furloughing:

‘It’s not in black and white but everyone knows you don’t have the safety net. Now it’s moving to be more like piece work – and if you don’t deliver, they get someone else’

Electrician, 60

‘The payroll companies who are supposed to make sure you have the same rights as a proper worker... can stop you getting the same benefits. So the guy next to you might get furlough but then the Payroll Co tell you that you aren’t entitled – they use loop holes’

Crawler Crane Driver, 34

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Some of the people who work on site now think they are indestructible.

Scaffolder, 60

Furloughing: an inconsistent approach

Based on previous experience of payroll companies, and observations on site, most interviewees expressed concern that some had, and others would, fall through cracks of the Covid-19 income support package:

‘I can’t believe how many young lads have been let go and have no income in the foreseeable future, telling people they were on short term contracts even though they’ve been there over a year – making excuses not to keep them furloughed. This is a massive problem’

[Scaffolder, 54](#)

‘It’s a fight to get any support, I know people in very bad positions financially, laid off or put on stand down. Bosses use loopholes where workers are on contracts to avoid giving them furlough. I know a lot of people who have been laid off.’

[Crawler Crane Driver, 34](#)

‘A guy has been 14 years with a site that closed – he got two week’s wages when they shut it down. The company doesn’t have to give you anything’

[Electrician, 60](#)

‘Umbrella companies distance themselves from their legal obligation even though on paper people are employed... They are not the kind of companies that are going to do the social work of making sure people get entitlements.’

[Scaffolder, 54](#)

Working during Covid-19

Earwig conducted a quick survey of platform users, which had been completed by 293 construction workers from 125 towns and 182 sites at the time of writing.

On social distancing, the survey found that only 14% of workers reported staggered start and finish times to reduce congestion and contact; 67% of workers responded that it was not possible to maintain 2m distance while eating to avoid contact. This was reinforced during our interviews with several explaining that proximity was core to their trade or common in their work.

‘It isn’t possible to abide by these rules in construction – there’s just no way to do it safely, the nature of the work is being in contact and touching things – even if they turn off finger ID sensors on the way in you’ve got to touch the loads to carry things around the site, the handrails, the scaffolding. It’s impossible’

[Crawler Crane Driver, 34](#)

On cleaning and protective equipment, only 32% of workers had noticed hand cleaning facilities introduced at site entrances and exits; and just 17% of workers said that re-useable personal protective equipment (‘PPE’) was thoroughly cleaned after use and not shared between workers. 36% reported that entry systems which required contact, such as fingerprint scanners, had been disabled or removed. A further 18% said they had been required to do work which requires skin to skin contact.

‘At the end of the day it’s my choice and decision, a colleague is working on the NEC temporary hospital build and I’ve been offered opportunities in that industry but I don’t think there’s enough being done, a friend said there’s no PPE provided but plenty of space. I just think with this driving job I know I’ve got less chance of spreading it’

[Communications Engineer, 29](#)

‘I was working on [site A] and a guy got sick... and was hospitalised with it. There had been 300 men on that site working with him, and 400 on [site B]. They shut [site A] down for one morning worth of deep clean and the next day everyone was back there. Nothing even happened on [site B]’

[Electrician, 60](#)

Working during Covid-19

One interviewee linked changing provision of PPE with the reform of the sector and greater number of agencies:

‘A few of the latest places I’ve been to won’t even give you a high vis. A few years ago you would always have been given it. You can tell everything is about cost, and the less PPE the less cost. This is partly because of the number of agencies competing to win work. They’re responsible for giving you the PPE and where the smaller ones try and undercut the bigger ones, they cut costs on it. You don’t need all the agencies – you just need a few that can be properly regulated with fair standards’

[Communications Engineer, 29](#)

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Personally, I think masks should have been mandatory a long time ago.

Communications Engineer, 29

Self-isolation: financial barriers

Several interviewees emphasised financial barriers to compliance with the Covid-19 health guidance. The disproportionate impact this would have on the younger parts of the workforce was a running theme, particularly for those with families and committed outgoings which exceeded the sum offered by Universal Credit:

‘I would rather be working, Universal Credit isn’t enough to support my family. I just want to get back to work – this isn’t dangerous for me’

[Electrician, 28](#)

‘I have a wife and three kids at home. I want them to be safe, I was still going in for two weeks after lockdown but we just decided we can’t’

[Crawler Crane Driver, 34](#)

‘There’s supposed to be a 6 week redundancy process if someone’s going to let you go – these people are being left out on a limb with no support. A lot of these business are small and if they are taken to tribunal they will lose everything. But they don’t know the rules’

[Scaffolder, 52](#)

‘A lot of people I know have been moving between PAYE and self-employed contracts, sometimes you have to go PAYE. That means they won’t have the pay from that time of work in their average, and they won’t qualify for furlough. Universal Credit is the only option for me – and it won’t even be enough to cover my mortgage’

[Electrician, 60](#)

Lack of communication

We heard about a number of public infrastructure projects which are continuing due to their classification as key services. While some firms in some sectors have communicated a clear strategy to all staff about who is deemed key, who will be kept on, who will be laid off and their respective entitlements, this model is not applied with any consistency. Workers do not feel confident that health guidance is respected, or informed about the rationale for 'key' vs 'non-key' projects:

'Are we key workers?
Is construction really essential?
Obviously a power outage or a leak would need people – but the everyday stuff...'

[Communications Engineer, 29](#)

'Why couldn't the unions fight to shut down all construction for three weeks? If we all actually did this at once it could work. This is the greatest time of need we've had'

[Crawler Crane Driver, 34](#)

'Some of the people who work on site now think they are indestructible – and you get more of this than those that turn around and point out risks where contractors are cutting corners'

[Scaffolder, 60](#)

Asked whether there had been any consultation with workers about strategies to manage and adjust onsite, one worker replied:

'Personally, I think masks should have been mandatory a long time ago but I've never been asked directly for my opinion on anything'

[Communications Engineer, 29](#)

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Looking forward

IFOW is proud to support Earwig, winner of our first Future of Work Challenge with InnovationRCA.

Earwig is seeking to promote higher standards, transparency and dialogue in the construction industry by creating a review platform co-created with construction workers. Their vision is for a transformation to good work throughout the sector, led by those who experience construction work on the ground every day.

www.earwigwork.com

‘Workers are looking for the best working conditions – safe sites and decent welfare, of course, but also trustworthy job information, a supportive workplace culture and reliable payments – so they can enjoy the rewards of good work. We are building the Earwig platform so workers can provide constant, live feedback on all of this. Great companies and sites will naturally rise to the top while poor companies and sites will be exposed and incentivized to do better. It’s about raising standards. The whole industry will be transformed by workers publishing reviews.’

Harrison Moore
Founder, Earwig

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* The sampling frame for this work does not meet our usual standards for qualitative research. This has been compromised for the purpose of speed and is deemed acceptable given the purpose outlined here. In particular, our interviewees did not feel able to give their location, only age and profession.

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