



Policy Briefing

9 March 2022

Life on the margins – Striking Churchill cleaners in their own words

Introduction

Cleaners employed by Churchill on a series of contracts in the Southeast, cleaning stations and trains on Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern, Southeastern, HS1 and Eurostar, are in dispute with their employer over pay, sick pay and travel facilities.

These cleaners worked through the pandemic when others could stay at home, cleaning trains and stations and keeping services running. Low pay on these contracts and the cost-of-living crisis means that Churchill's cleaners are really struggling to make ends meet.

We think it's important that you hear directly from those people about life on the margins.

The crushing effects of low pay

Churchill pays cleaners on Southeastern, Eurostar and HS1 £9.50 per hour. On Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern, cleaners get £8.91 per hour.

Even before the recent sharp rise in inflation, these cleaners were struggling to put food on the table and heat their rooms.

In a recent survey of these cleaners, RMT found that 61% reported that they sometimes or regularly struggle to get by.

- "It's difficult, I can't live with this money to month. Nearly every month I get a loan from friends. Sometimes I travel 2 hours on the bus to work because it's cheaper to pay for a weekly bus travelcard."
- "As I'm a single mum with 2 kids I have to calculate all the money and what it gets spent on. I can't pay for any activities for the kids, nor any holiday because we can't save any money."
- "I've had to turn off 2 radiators due to gas price rises. I regularly have to ask my parents for help with shopping money."
- "Me and my wife claim universal credit as she's on part time hours. Yet we still struggle when Churchill don't pay us enough and correctly. This month I was £480 down."

- "As a single mother I had to apply for Universal Credit. The company does not help you at all as an employee. We as parents go to bed at night thinking about what we will put on our children's table the next day, how we will pay rent or utilities."
- "My salary is to pay my bills, the travel expenses per month which are £ 80 and for food. That much with a monthly salary of £1300."
- "I have used a food bank because our low wage is not enough to live on. My electric and gas has gone up so I don't have the heating on much. I have to shower instead of have a bath because it's cheaper."
- "The money I get from Churchill is very little when I pay my rent house my bills and I have very little money left to connect the two ends. It is extremely difficult for me because they require a lot of work from the whole team because there are not enough staff and the money is very little."
- "All I'm trying to do is provide for my family and 90% of the time it feels like I'm not doing enough due to the poor wages or wages not being correct. It's even got to a point on some months where I need to even take a loan out just to get my bills paid for the month. I have a 5-year old daughter that I would love to take out on my days off but I can't because we just don't get paid enough."
- "I have been working for years now hoping things will get better, but instead, things are getting worse. Living with 4 children and my wife isn't easy when receiving the Minimum Wage from Churchill. Sometimes, I struggle to pay my house rent or to buy food on the table for my children throughout the covid-19. I have been going to work every day to do my job, hoping that my wages rise because of the good work we were doing for Churchill. I have now borrowed money more than before."
- "It's very hard, Churchill really takes the piss out of us. We're working all night cleaning trains and we can't even make living out of it."
- "It's very, very hard living on our wages in London. We just try to manage with it but at times we end up collecting credit cards which has led most of us into debts".
- "Our wages make life difficult, especially those of us in London. It can only pay off rent and then you have to go in for a loan to pay off other expenses and some times end up not able to pay off the loan with its interest."
- "It is really hard. During Covid we worked extra hard because our managers added saloon sanitisation and cab cleaning to our duties as they got a contract from GTR. We the low staff did not get any pay increases for doing extra jobs, staff numbers were not increased to help us to do the extra work but we were forced to work extra. I take home an average £1250 a month and with a family of five you can imagine how I am able to survive with that. I think Churchill is been unreasonable and exploiting their workers for their profit gains and am surprised GTR has been silent and unconcerned about the plight of the Churchill cleaners."
- "I never have any money left in my Bank account after paying my bills and I always find it very difficult waiting for my next payment ...and the same scenario start again."

Covid heroes reduced to working while sick

Churchill do not pay their cleaners occupational sick pay. This means that cleaners regularly face the choice between calling in sick and not being paid or going into work while ill. 69% reported that they have gone into work while sick because they couldn't afford not to work. This has included during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- "If I feel sick I'm coming into work because I live alone and I need to pay my rent. And around Covid-19, if I can I'll try to come to work because if I don't come I need to take money from friends again and that's not nice".
- "I have worked throughout the Covid-19 period. No compensation was given to anyone. My colleague had Covid-19 and was seriously sick. Sadly she didn't get any pay."
- "I had COVID back in December and after I isolated I was still poorly but I had to return to work."
- "I just have to still force myself to go to work even though not feeling well. You will call Churchill manager that you are not well and straight away they won't believe your illness, Churchill don't treat their workers well."
- "Last year I was sick and my GP prescribed me one week sick note. When I returned to work the following week I handed my sick note to my Line Manager and Churchill paid me £38.50 for the whole week. That was very shocking and the company never ever paid me back my money."
- "I do go in to work sick. I am asthmatic I suffer from chest infections a lot but cannot afford to have time off."
- "I have several chronic conditions that leave me in pain. When I'm in pain I have to work, so I survive on paracetamol to get me through the pain, and when I have hospital and doctors' appointments for blood tests and so on I have to use my holidays to cover my appointment."
- "I've just been off sick and had to come back early despite not being ready as I can't afford to be off."
- "We go into work with flu symptoms which is dangerous for us and who we are in contact with".
- "I've gone into work while sick. Because of debts (credit cards) and other expenses like rents and transportation I have to manage and go."
- "I try never to take off days for sick I would never be able to afford rent or food".
- "It's already not enough what I get as salary working all my shift during the month and if it happens that I get sick during a month, I have to be prepared for a very difficult period as I won't get paid... unless I force myself into going to work being sick."

Churchill incompetence adding to low pay misery

In addition to paying low wages, Churchill regularly make errors in calculating cleaners' wages. This can have a devastating effect on fragile domestic economies and involves the cleaners in lengthy disputes with their managers.

- "I find it a struggle to provide for my family the wages they are giving is not enough to live on after paying bills I have to buy cheap food also I'm down £700 this month were my wages have been messed up."
- "Having to examine and work out each pay check, to make sure it's correct, is not something I should be doing. It is the responsibility of Churchill to ensure my pay is calculated correctly, I shouldn't have to chase after lost money that I may or may not receive."
- "When I received my payslip on Friday I was shocked caused the money was inaccurate and the tax unbelievable."
- "They never get our pay correct which makes it harder to pay our bills."

Cleaners are angry and have no other option but strikes

Churchill cleaners are angry. They feel exploited by their employers and ignored by the train companies and many politicians. Directors of Churchill trade on awards from industry competitions and pay themselves dividends, while saying they'd love to pay cleaners more but the train companies won't allow it. The train companies wash their hands of these cleaners and say it's an issue for Churchill and the Prime Minister praises cleaners while presiding over a pay freeze on the railways.

These cleaners have tried the route of negotiation and found it blocked by well-paid directors who shrug their shoulders and offload the blame and a government that does nothing to help.

- "I'm angry because while they sat at home protecting themselves from Covid-19 we were in the thick of it which has resulted in me having a shoulder injury".
- "It disgusts me that we do not get the recognition we deserve. We as cleaners are doing our utmost to make sure every train is up to a high standard and hearing people get the praise for our work is degrading especially when we barely get paid enough to live and provide for our families as it is, no human being deserves to feel like they can't provide for their family."
- "I feel like garbage, not gonna lie. Every time they send "praises" for our "heroic" fights and give us... a water bottle --I feel like they spit in my face".
- 'We simply do not live in their world. Strip them of everything and pay them a cleaners wage for a month..'

- It's very frustrating because those we're doing all the sacrifice, we live a very miserable life while those directors staying in their offices and driving big cars have all the praise.
- "Their actions do not reflect their words of 'praise'. Praise does not pay the bills or put food on the table."
- "We spend our working life with blood, sick, excrement every day, making things safe for train travel, we should be better paid."
- "Makes me sick to my stomach. When you see the profits they make and what they pay out on wages it is beyond disgusting. The thing that really angers me is that these 'big wigs' have no idea how to do the job or what is involved. A Churchill manager thought a train only had one cab and it was from then on I had zero respect for the company and the people above me. ..I have been cleaning trains for many years and out of all the firms Churchill is by far the worst. Previous companies weren't great but in comparison, they look more appealing now then they certainly did back then."
- "They wouldn't last 5 mins in the job we do".
- "Disgusted. They couldn't do what we do for crap wages."
- "I feel that we aren't appreciated enough - that we don't get credit and the company does."
- "In this world politicians are with rich people and poor with the hope to God to struggle and fight to make ends meet but those people forget at the end everyone will meet at same place".