



Cleaners in the cost-of-living crisis

Covid heroes living on the margins

RMT Report October 2022

Introduction

“With the cost of living and utility bills rising to extortionate amounts, it is becoming extremely hard to budget my wages to pay off bills and other expenses, as a cleaner I am on the lowest pay scale in my company, we really get no backing and none of the management seem to care, we work extremely hard and worked through the pandemic to make sure that all the trains were cleaned and disinfected so they were still able to run in service but all this seems to have been forgotten and we feel that we are just being taken for granted, this is being reflected in our wage slips.” Cleaner, RMT.

In October 2022, as RPI inflation topped 12.6%, RMT conducted a survey of our cleaning grade members asking them about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. More than 1,000 cleaners responded over the course of five days. This report contains the findings of that survey. These findings help to explain why RMT cleaners are rising up and why our union is balloting more cleaners than ever for industrial action on the railways.

Outsourcing and low pay in cleaning

As we showed in our 2021 report, *Cleaning Up the Railway*, most cleaners on rail, as in the wider economy, are outsourced and their wages are held down to generate profits. As a recent report conducted on behalf of the Office of Rail and Road expressed it, typically cleaners’ “pay is low (and heavily influenced by the statutory minimum), premiums for unsocial hours working have been reduced or removed, and the wider reward package is minimal often only providing statutory minimum entitlements.”¹

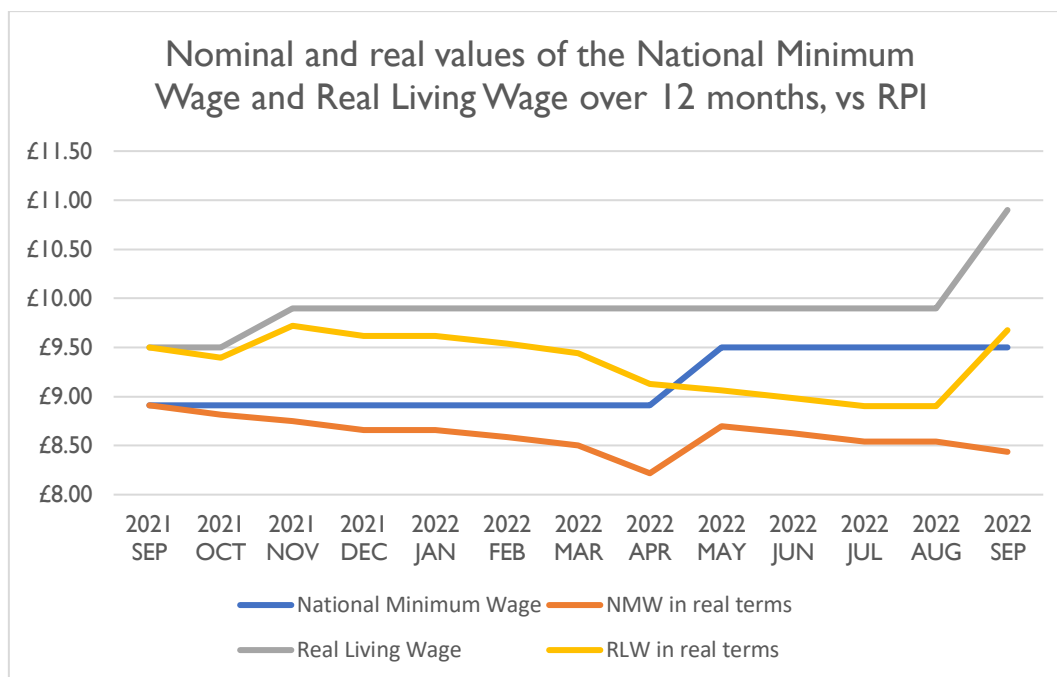
RMT’s data on collective agreements, pay rates and survey evidence confirms this for the rail industry. RMT’s survey data shows that outside London, 44% of cleaners earn below £10 an hour (Figure 4, Appendix) but that this figure rises to almost 70% when you exclude insourced cleaners employed by Transport for Wales, Northern Trains and Scotrail (Figure 5, Appendix). Outsourced cleaners employed outside overwhelmingly earn between £9 and £9.99 an hour. Inside London, around 80% of cleaners are employed around the London Living Wage, between £11 and £11.99 an hour (Figure 6, Appendix). In addition, outsourced cleaners do not have occupational sick pay or decent pensions.

Collapsing wages and the cost of living

The escalating cost-of-living crisis has had a catastrophic effect on the already-low pay of these workers. As inflation has risen more rapidly, so these wages have declined sharply in value. Figure 1 below shows the decline in the earning power of both the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and the Real Living Wage (RLW) over the last 12 months. Even allowing for the uplift to the NMW in April, this is worth significantly less than a year ago. The value of the RLW has also fallen in the last year and even the recent uplift will not have reached cleaners yet as implementation by accredited employers is not mandatory and they have until May 2024 – 8 months away - to put it in place. Nor is it guaranteed that any uplift will ever be backdated.

¹ *Review of rail industry employment costs - A report for the Office of Rail and Road, IDR and Steer (October 2022), pp. 46-47.*

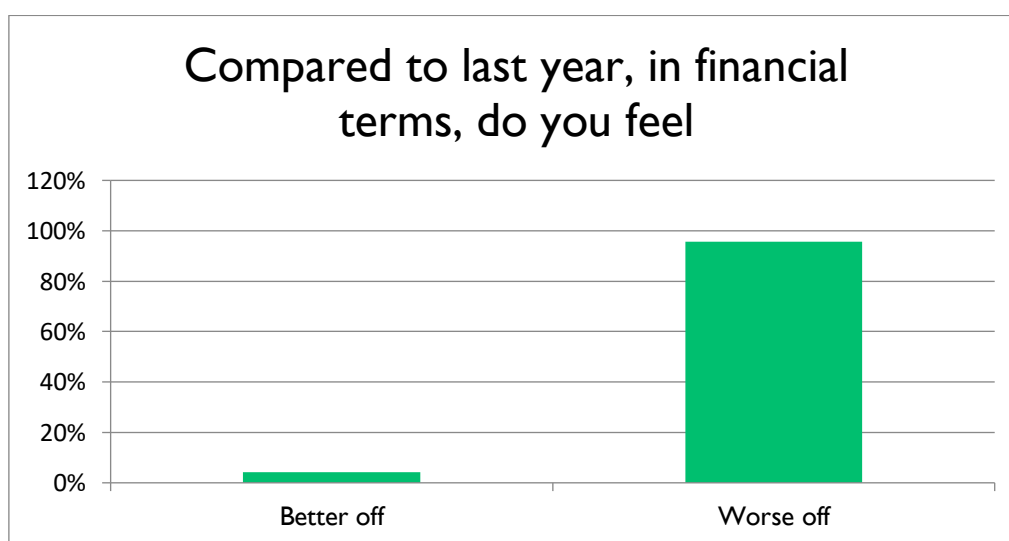
Figure 1: Real value of National Minimum and Real Living Wages



- A full-time worker on the National Minimum Wage is around £880 a year worse off now than they were 12 months ago.
- A worker on the Real Living Wage would be £500 a year better off than they were 12 months ago, assuming that their employer instantly implemented the new rates. Given that the vast majority won't have done, a cleaner on the RLW will still be £900 a year worse off.
- A worker on the London Living Wage will be almost £1,700 worse off than they were 12 months ago.²

This fall in wages has certainly been felt by cleaners. 96% of cleaners surveyed told RMT that they felt worse off in financial terms than they did last year.

Figure 2: Perceptions of the cost of living

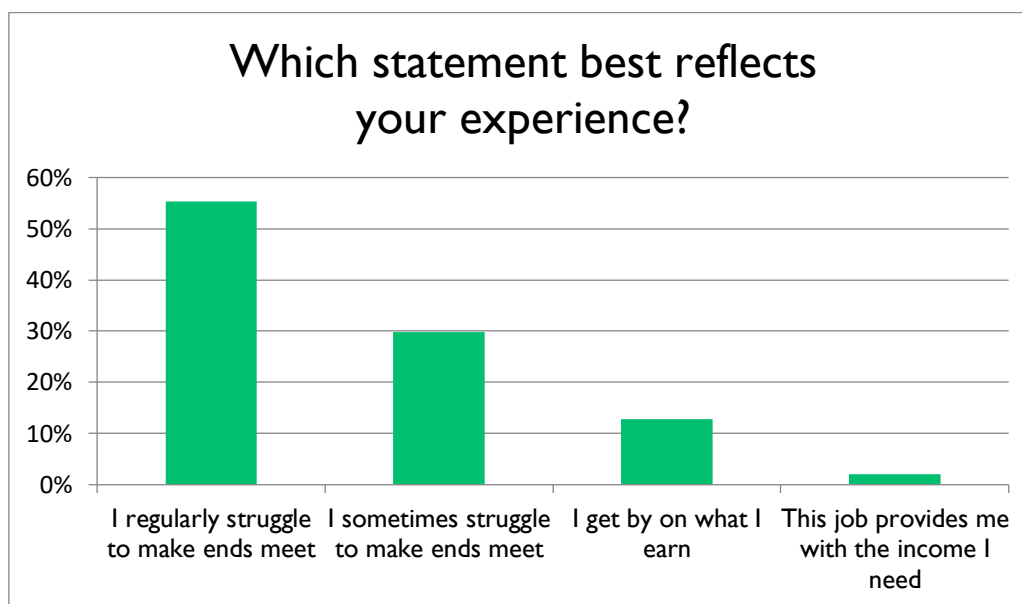


² This is calculated assuming that cleaners work a 35.8 hour week over 52 weeks. In practice many will be earning significantly less than this.

In June 2019, RMT surveyed cleaners asking them whether their wages enabled them to make ends meet. 63% said they sometimes or regularly struggle to get by on what they earn.

When the union put the same question to cleaners again in October 2022, the results were starkly different. **84% of people responding said they sometimes or regularly struggled to make ends meet**, with **55% saying they regularly struggle**.

Figure 3: Making ends meet



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“I am a mother, I do this night shift because of my kids, but the job does not pay well enough. Are we not a human being, no sick pay at all? I was sick during covid 19, I collected an isolation note from NHS, I submit it to my workplace. I did not get paid for sick. I wrote to HR I was told isolation is pay at SSP [Statutory Sick Pay]. I was shocked.”

“We’re a family of five. I’m perpetually broke. My wage can only pay rent and council tax”.

“This job is not easy at all because they are using us like animals, no sick pay, no free ticket and they don't pay for break. Everybody knows how this country is now, everything goes up.”

“I'm a head of a family with four children plus my wife. Can you imagine the food we eat, rent, council tax, water and energy bills, buying fuel and many more that I can't even get enough space to write them.”

The worsening struggle to make ends meet

The survey also contained shocking details of the kinds of measures these low paid cleaners were driven to in order to try to make up for low wages. With the escalating energy costs, 62% of cleaners reported having reduced their use of heating and hot water. Half of cleaners reported having had to ask friends or family for financial help. More than one in three are relying on credit cards to cover everyday spending. 28% said they are missing meals and 26% reported having to cut spending on their children. 13% of cleaners, more than one in 10, reported resorting to food banks in the last year.

Table 1: Making ends meet

In the last year have you had to do or plan to do any of the following to help make ends meet? (Tick all that apply)		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Use a food bank	13%	118
Ask for financial help from friends or family	50%	434
Take out a pay day loan	13%	117
Rely on a credit card to cover everyday spending	37%	321
Miss meals	28%	242
Access Universal Credit	11%	96
Take a second job	14%	120
Reduce your use of heating or hot water	62%	541
Cut spending on children	26%	226
Other (please specify)	13%	110

"I have to rely on monetary help from my 67 year old mother for food, fares to work, clothes for my daughter etc. I'm scared to put my heating on, I'm thousands of pounds in rent arrears and Council tax arrears. I'm just surviving but without help I'd probably be homeless due to eviction."

"I've been asking for financial help from friends. I took out a payday loan last year and repaying as at now."

"It is not enough what ABM pays us, we work at night and they pay us the same as those who work during the day. As much as they pay us, we don't even have enough to pay the rent, not to mention food, children's clothes and bills."

"I am constantly borrowing from my parents to cover the cost of my childrens' birthdays and issues in the house like washing machine breaking and I had to use the food bank twice this year as I have been waiting on my overtime payments since April."

"I regularly borrow to get to end of the week particularly after fuelling car. Also dont put heating on wear extra clothing. Try to avoid treats for children where possible."

“Price hikes have made it impossible for me to live comfortably on what I earn with Servest. Due to this I have to work a second job while sitting in the cold at home and asking family to help out, but this is only short-term fix as I have to pay family back as soon as I get paid which makes me short the following month and end up in a vicious circle where I need to rely on family the following month.... All because we can't get the wage we should be getting.”

“It is getting hard and harder to manage on this wage and it's a massive worry. if you work you should not have to worry about eating and heating and even worry about getting to work because some shift we work you have to get a taxi because the shifts start before a bus service and that is a cost we could do without. And we don't get free train travel which I can't believe. It would help if we did get free train travel.”

“I can't afford to buy decent food, I always go to food bank”.

“I'm in debt with friends and credit cards just to support my family”.

“Most times we skip dinner, we eat twice a day.”

“When I run out of wage before payday I have to use credit or lend the money, also I have had to stop giving so much money for nephews and nieces birthday and Christmas.”

“I have been struggling to pay my bills and travel costs to work as I don't drive.”

“My wages is not enough as it just covers my bills I sometimes have to ask my family members for money for shopping as I need to provide for my family.”

Rail cleaners - Betrayed to predatory companies

The cost-of-living crisis among cleaners is a disgrace to the rail industry. People who put their lives on the line to keep trains and stations safe to use during the Covid-19 crisis are being betrayed.

These cleaners are being preyed on by a group of outsourcing companies whose profits have doubled from before the pandemic, but who are determined to hold down workers' wages and lock them into ever deeper impoverishment to keep the dividends flowing to the super-rich.

This predatory behaviour is taking place with the full knowledge, connivance and support of Executives in Network Rail, the Train Operating Companies and Transport for London. These companies shamefully wash their hands of responsibility claiming that pay rates and employment conditions are the responsibility of the employer, not the contractor.

This is why cleaners are rising up in the rail industry and across the economy. There will be no return to how things were before the pandemic. And that is why the industry must change. It must raise pay for cleaners across our rail networks, bring in proper sick pay, implement free travel and bring in proper pensions so that cleaners can have a decent pension in retirement. The industry must end its complicity in this shameful employment model and put an end to the scourge of outsourcing.

Appendix – Additional charts and tables

Figure 4: All cleaners' pay – outside London

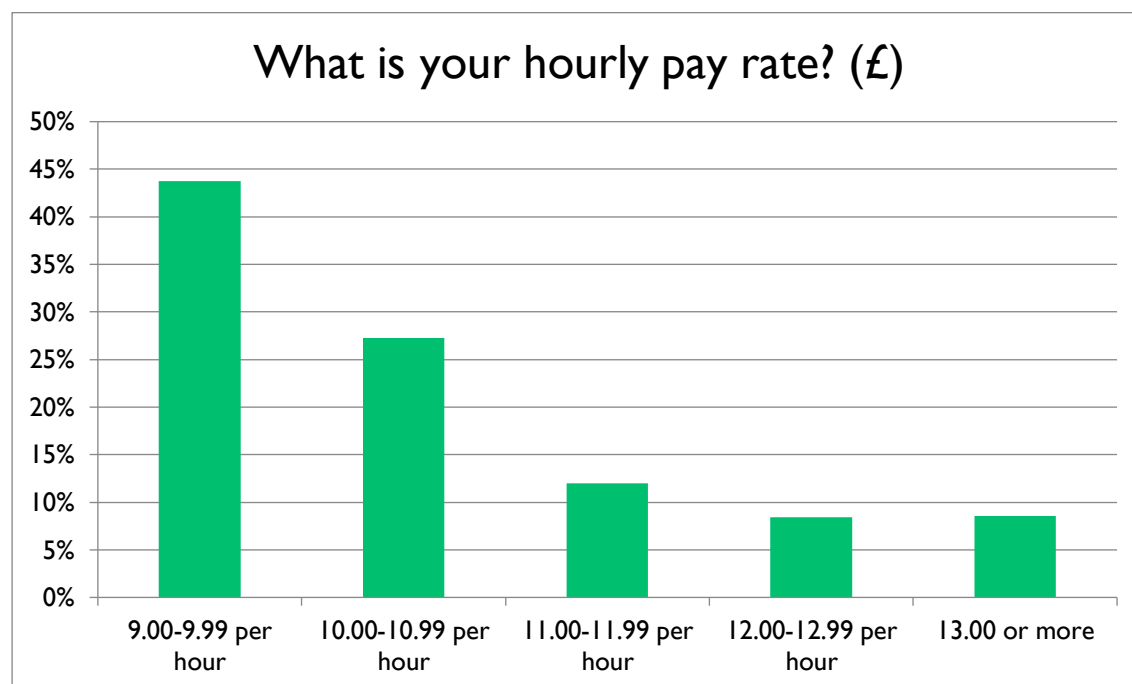


Figure 5: Outsourced cleaners' pay outside London

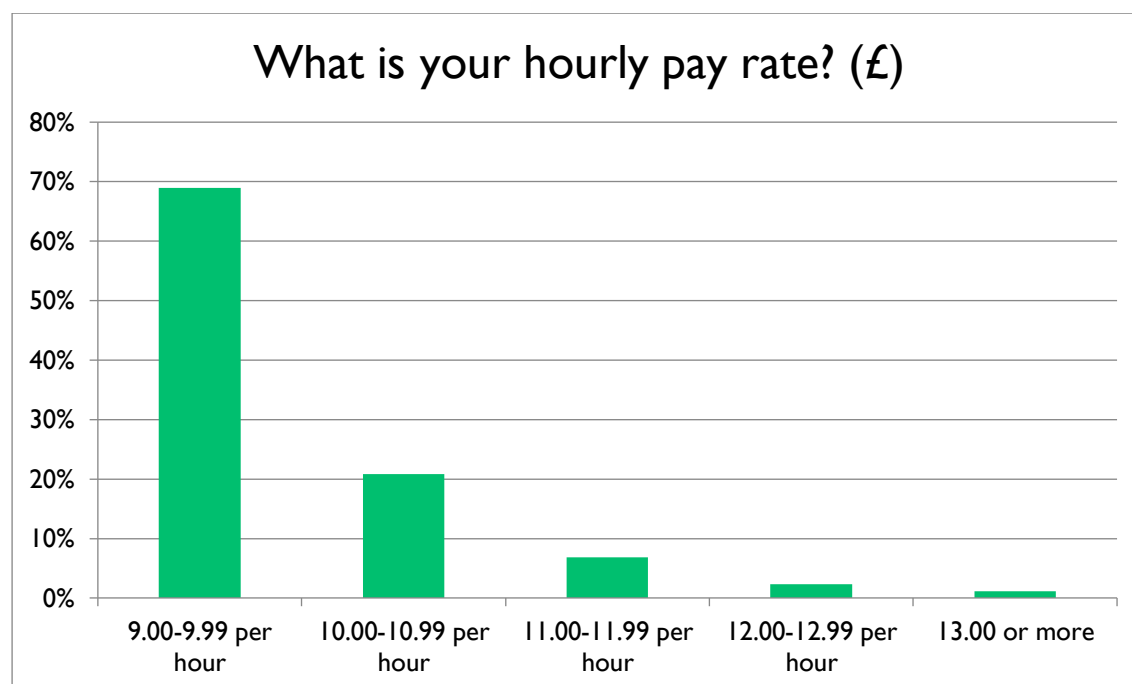


Figure 6: All cleaners' pay – inside London

