Worker Protections - The Burden Narratives

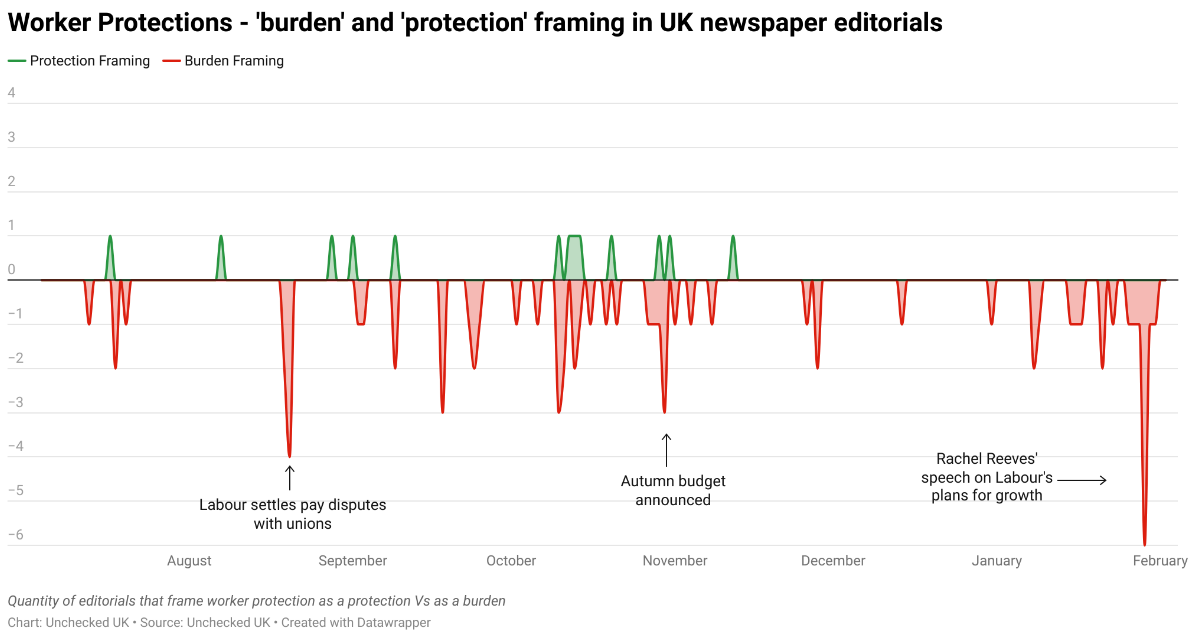
Introduction and methodology

Since Labour took office on July 4th, we've been analysing the editorials of leading UK newspapers. We want to explore how the national press discusses worker protection, whether they are 'on side', or whether, as might be expected, they are hostile to calls for stronger regulation of the labour market. Alongside this, we're keen to understand the dominant narratives that drive calls for greater protection, or conversely, for deregulation.

To explore this question, we've analysed the editorials of eight national newspapers, starting on July 4th 2024 when Labour took office, up to January 31st 2025. The newspapers we analysed are representative of the political leanings of the national press. The four newspapers from the right-leaning press are The Times, The Telegraph, The Mail and The Sun. From the centre ground, The Independent and The Financial Times - and from the progressive side of the press The Guardian and The Mirror.

Editorials represent the 'formal voice' of the newspaper and therefore provide a good vantage point for understanding how the press frames this issue. What's more, the editorial, or the 'leading article' of the newspaper, can be a major driver of public opinion and therefore offers a solid way to explore how newspapers affect public attitudes and UK political discourse more broadly. For more details on how we conducted our analysis, check out our methodology here.

Worker protections are more commonly presented as burdens than as protections



Worker protections are far more likely to be presented as burdens than as necessary protections. **In the six months since Labour has been in power, 69 editorials have framed worker promotions as burdens compared to just 13 that have framed them as protections.** The Guardian and Mirror have been behind the positive framing of worker protections, alongside one editorial from the Financial Times. The burden framing has been driven most heavily by the Daily Mail and Telegraph, with The Times, The Sun and The Financial Times also regularly framing worker protections as burdens.

There are a number of narratives underpinning the negative framing which are outlined below.

Narrative 1: Worker protections are costly red tape for employers / business

New rules will stifle / strangle business

- Mail - "Sir Keir Starmer says that the Government's priority is boosting the economy to 'take the brakes off Britain'. Take the Employment Rights Bill…**all the evidence suggests this increase in red tape will strangle the private sector."**

- Mail - **"If firing staff becomes more difficult, firms could be deterred from hiring**. If an overweening state **imposes extra costs and obligations**, businesses will find it harder to make a profit and help expand the economy."

The Employment Rights Bill is a cost to business

- Telegraph editorial "Ms Reeves…seeks to suffocate [the private sector] with tax rises, more rules and greater interference. **The big increase in the National Minimum Wage, including a 16 per cent rise for 18-20 year olds, is a cost on business** and not a gift from the government. New rights for employees already announced are another burden on employers estimated at £5 billion"

- The Sun - "We are shocked — shocked — to discover Angela Rayner's workers' rights Bill will do next to nothing for growth and instead cost businesses £5billion."

- The Sun - "Meanwhile, on the economy, **owners of small businesses fear Labour's sweeping new rights for workers will prove ruinous ... Ending zero hours contracts altogether could put many small firms under.** The new Government needs to urgently reassure these vital employers that it has their backs. They should be at the heart of Sir Keir's push for growth."

Narrative 2: Workplace regulations limit our capacity to boost growth

New regulations will scare off investors and entrepreneurs

- Times - "The legislation threatens to **undermine Britain's competitiveness** when growth should be the government's overriding priority."

- Times - Employment Rights Bill will deter investment - "tighter regulation of the labour market could **deter overseas investors and the corporate sector generally from committing money to the UK**."

- Mail "Labour's plans to hike taxes, **boost trade union power and strengthen workers' rights are 'scaring off' entrepreneurs**. This will hold back plans for new jobs and investment."

New laws will be a brake on growth

- The Telegraph - "What is increasingly evident, however, is that the **Government simply has no real plan for delivering the economic growth it promised**… businesses will continue to struggle under a mounting pile of red tape, as the Government seeks to radically reform the labour market by making flexible working the default, and making it easier for staff to sue employers."

- Mail - “Businesses are fearful, too, of a Budget with growth-crushing taxes, the heavy cost of new workers' rights and anti-strike laws. Rather than turbocharging growth, Labour risks plunging us into a recession.”

- The Times - “There are already concerning indications that in pursuing its planned overhaul of employment legislation, the government will place **unnecessary obstacles in the path of its much-touted mission to stimulate growth**.”

- Mail - “if an overweening state imposes **extra costs and obligations, businesses will find it harder to make a profit and help expand the economy**.”

- Mail - “As if all this weren’t enough, Labour is also bringing in a ‘New Deal’ for workers, which will saddle businesses with a **raft of new regulations, obligations and costs, raising prices and stifling growth.”**

Narrative 3: New regulations will lead to social and economic disruption

Emboldening unions will bring chaos

- Sun - “Incredibly, though, the new Government intends to make strikes easier. Overturning a Tory law, it would allow walkouts without unions needing majority support from their members. **That is a green light for mayhem. It is not an end to strikes, nor the blueprint for growth** Labour says it has prioritised.”

- Mail - ”Yet far from being grateful, they are ravenous for more. RMT chief Mick Lynch is **demanding nothing less than ‘the complete organisation of the UK economy by trade unions’.** Starmer wants to sweep away the Thatcher reforms and **make it easier to shut down workplaces and even entire industries** if employers fail to meet demands on pay and conditions. Welcome back to the 1970s.”

- The Telegraph - “A new bill is expected to be introduced this autumn to repeal current laws stipulating the proportion of union members needed to vote for strike action in order for it to be legal…**A return to the bad old days before New Labour came to power in 1997** pledging to keep the Thatcher-era reforms is now well advanced.”

New laws are a cynical political move

- The Mail - “As if all this weren’t enough, Labour is also bringing in a ‘New Deal’ for workers, which will saddle businesses with a raft of new regulations, obligations and costs, raising prices and stifling growth. So, **for the unions, having Labour in**

power is equivalent to a lottery win. Sadly, everyone else looks like losing their shirt.”

- The Mail - “**Labour and the unions are more closely bound now than they have been for years**. As we reveal today, more than half the party’s 404 MPs have received union cash since the election was called in May, some £1.8million in all. And that investment is now being repaid on a grand scale, with a string of hugely generous, taxpayer-funded wage rises.”
- Times article - “The party’s promotion of stronger workers’ rights during the election campaign was consistent with a **strategy aimed at consolidating its working class base and retrieving voters in the red wall seats seduced by Boris Johnson in 2019.** Many of those defectors continued to pose a flight risk in 2024, this time to Reform. A policy focusing on “working people” was therefore judged by party strategists to be astute. Behind it all is the looming threat of more invasive unions. Firms will be required to inform workers of their right to join a union and allow union access to workplaces to recruit and organise. **All union members will contribute to political funds, funnelling millions into Labour’s coffers, unless they opt out. Currently, only those opting in pay”**

Narrative 4: Markets know best

Ministers must not tell employers how to run their businesses

- The Telegraph - [In response to flexible working agenda] “Jonathan Reynolds, the Business Secretary, says allowing flexible working and working from home creates a more productive, loyal workforce. How does he know? Mr Reynolds is a solicitor by training and has never run a business as far as we can tell. Neither, indeed, have any of his Cabinet colleagues and yet they have taken it upon themselves to back a “new deal for workers” which will make it harder to make a profit and help grow the economy.”
- The Mail - “Mr Reynolds plans to enshrine in law the right to work from home, saying staff that do can be more 'motivated'. But **businesses know what's best** for them and their workers – not some man from the ministry.”
- Telegraph - “But it is not axiomatic, as Sir Keir maintains, that government interventionism always brings about better outcomes. Indeed history tells us the opposite is true.”

Businesses must be listened to

- FT -‘Labour must keep listening to business’ - **“Labour has shown itself ready to listen to business — even at risk of irking its union allies. It should continue to heed corporate concerns as it thrashes out how the bill will be implemented.** Above all, it must not undermine the priority of boosting UK growth, productivity and competitiveness in its quest to bolster workers’ rights.”
- FT - “The goal must be to create the infrastructure for investment and entrepreneurialism to thrive so that growth can take off — but without overweening

interference. Starmer's Labour was embraced by many businesses in the run-up to the election. They appreciate stability and a growth agenda. But **they need to see more commitment to the needs of private enterprise**. A coming package on employee rights, which many companies fear will tilt the balance too far towards workers, will be a key test."

Britain needs a (US-style) free market revolution

- The Telegraph - "For all the talk about growth in the lead up to the election, his record in office so far has been to impose one of the largest tax hikes in history and **increase the burden of regulation on employers**…It would be to the **benefit of this country and his party if he were to consider taking a leaf from Mr Trump's book.**"
- The Telegraph - 'Britain needs a free market revolution' - "But with Trump's America roaring ahead, we will need it more than ever. **The state needs to be slimmed down. Entrepreneurs need to be encouraged. Markets need to be opened up.** And taxes desperately need to be cut to allow people to keep more of the money they earn…The Trump administration is about to show us how it can be done, and demonstrate the dramatic impact **even a modest move towards freer markets can have on living standards**. The only real question will be this. How long will it take for the voters to notice – and to demand a government willing to follow America's lead?"