



Party Conferences: Employment proposals

Party conference season has been and gone. As is customary, all of the main party leaders took the opportunity to deliver withering attacks on their opponents' policies (and Nigel Farage was seen drinking in a pub), but what was said on the subject of employment? The key announcements were as follows:

Conservatives

Having already had ample opportunity (subject to coalitionary constraints) to make any desired changes during their 4 years in power, it was no great surprise that the Conservatives did not propose radical changes to the existing employment regime.

- **Industrial action:** Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude announced plans to make industrial action much more difficult by requiring that strikes can only take place if they relate to recent ballots with a minimum 50% turnout.
- **Zero-hours contracts:** The Prime Minister said that he will ban exclusive zero-hours contracts, although how this will be achieved is unlikely to be resolved until after the Government's current consultation on anti-avoidance has run its course.
- **Human Rights:** The Prime Minister said that he will revamp human rights law in the UK by passing a new British Bill of Rights, which would mean that the UK Parliament and courts would have the final say on such matters rather than the European Court of Human Rights, as is the current position.

Labour

As expected, a raft of employment reforms were proposed at the Labour conference in Manchester. Leader of the Opposition Ed Milliband announced his six-point plan – "Britain 2025" – which set out the goals for a Labour Government over the next two parliamentary terms, and employment featured in four of them (the other two being proposals to build more houses and increase NHS funding).

- **"Making work pay":** Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Ed Balls announced that a Labour Government would increase the national minimum wage to £8 an hour, offer working parents with 3 to 4 year old children breakfast school, after school clubs and 25 hours of free

childcare per week, end the use of zero-hours contracts, and give tax breaks to businesses that pay the living wage.

- **Compulsory Jobs Guarantee:** Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary Rachel Reeves plans to introduce a compulsory jobs guarantee, under which under-25s and over-25s will be offered a job after one year and two years of unemployment respectively. If they refuse this job, their entitlement to unemployment benefits will be removed.
- **Publication of average pay:** Shadow Minister for Women and Equality Gloria del Piero said that a Labour Government would introduce legislation which will mean that companies with more than 250 employees will have to publish the average pay of men and women at each pay grade, so that female employees can see whether top roles "are being done by men or if they are doing the same jobs as their male colleague for less pay".
- **Publication of social background data:** Gloria del Piero also announced plans to require public sector organisations to publish data on the social background of their employees.
- **More apprenticeships:** Leader of the Opposition Ed Milliband announced that he wants to increase the number of young people in apprenticeships in both the public and private sectors. He indicated that private organisations would have to provide apprenticeships if they were to win Government contracts.
- **Equal rights for the self-employed:** Ed Milliband also announced that a Labour Government would deliver equal rights (presumably equal to employees) for the self-employed.
- **Tribunal Fees:** Chuka Umunna, the Shadow Business Secretary, announced that Labour will abolish employment tribunal fees should they win next year's General Election.

Liberal Democrats

The Lib Dems made several employment proposals at their Glasgow conference. Similar to the Conservatives, they were fairly muted in comparison to Labour's plans.

- **Workers' rights:** Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills Vince Cable announced plans to review workers' rights. Currently, workers are not entitled to many of the rights that employees have, such as protection from unfair dismissal and statutory redundancy pay. The aim of the review (as set out on the BIS website) will be to determine "how clear the current employment framework is, what the options are to extend some employment rights to more people and whether there is scope to streamline this very complex area of employment law, thus simplifying and clarifying rights for both employers and employees". The results of the review will be published before the general election, in March 2015. The Lib Dems have also announced the proposal (to be included in the Lib Dem manifesto in 2015) to create a new Workers' Rights Agency, which will revamp efforts to enforce employment law and tackle the exploitation of workers.
- **Blanking-out of jobseekers' names in public sector:** Party members have backed the use of 'name-blank' applications form in the public sector, in an attempt to improve equality and cut discrimination.
- **Increase in national minimum wage for apprentices:** Vince Cable announced that he would write to the Low Pay Commission with a view to increasing the minimum wage for first-year apprentices by £1 an hour.
- **Boardroom diversity:** Vince Cable wants to promote the representation of ethnic minorities on company boards. He said that every FTSE company now has a woman on its board, and that he wants to do the same for ethnic minorities.
- **Support for litigants in person:** Justice Minister Simon Hughes MP has said that before Christmas an announcement will be made to address the question of how to better support litigants in person in the civil courts.