

Revealed: UK's COVID heroes among hardest hit by cost of living crisis

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Losing their homes, struggling for food - cleaners, health and transport workers say strikes are their only option

At the height of the pandemic, as hundreds were dying each day, Ivan Andino was travelling across London on a crowded Tube carriage to clean an empty office.

Ivan works for Mitie, one of the UK's biggest outsourcing companies, and cleans Vodafone's global headquarters, which take up five floors of a glossy Paddington high-rise.

While Vodafone's staff were sent home when [COVID](#) cases were peaking, Mitie insisted Ivan and his colleagues continue cleaning, rather than placing them on furlough.

"We were made to come in every day to deep clean an already spotless office," Ivan recalls. "Inevitably, I got sick and so did all of my co-workers."

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In June, Mitie announced profits of £167m, boosted by £429m of government COVID contracts in [its annual results](#). But Ivan says [his pay hasn't](#) kept up – Mitie agreed to a small rise only after a campaign led by his union, the IWGB. With inflation [now reaching 10%](#) and [rents rising by 13% in London since last year](#), he's worried about providing for his daughter.

"I have a colleague who works two jobs already, he also is a delivery worker, and he is still struggling," says Ivan, who is 39 and originally from Ecuador.

Like many low-paid workers in the UK, Ivan and his colleagues were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. They were more likely to be exposed to greater health risks, have their earnings reduced, or lose their jobs altogether, [according to the International Labour Organisation](#). Now low-earners are also bearing the brunt of the cost of living crisis because they spend [a higher proportion](#)

[of their disposable income](#) on food, energy and fuel.

Many of those who are being hit the hardest were on the front lines of the pandemic. Claire, 45, has worked as a carer for seven years. In April, she was evicted after falling into rent arrears. She now lives with her brother.

The pressures of the job started to affect Claire's mental health even before the pandemic, but her condition worsened when she was unable to see family or friends to avoid potentially exposing the residents of the care home she worked at to COVID.

Claire has had to rely on food banks four times in the past five years and borrow money from her family to get by, despite being in work. Just over 70% of care workers are paid below the Real Living Wage, which campaigners say is the minimum wage needed to meet everyday needs and is currently set at £10.85 in London and £9.50 for the rest of the UK.

"Carers are paid such little money, really, for such an important job. You go into people's homes and sometimes you'll be the last person that they see if they're dying, or the only person they see at all. I don't know how that can be," she says.

Alan Hiscutt, who manages an elderly people's care home in Southampton and has worked as carer for 15 years, has seen many people leave, particularly after the gruelling experience of working in care homes during the pandemic.

"It was the constant hand washing leaving you with cracked skin, the blisters and rashes and from wearing full PPE for 12 hours a day and having to do that for 50, 60, 70 hours a week. Those are the sacrifices that people don't talk about but that's what the care workers were going through," he recalls.

"And then for them to be told as a group: 'There's no money for you'? Most of them just shrug their shoulders and go: 'We didn't expect it anyway.' Because that's how social care has been treated for such a long time."

Alan fears that the cost of living crisis could now push more care workers into poverty.

"I met someone recently who is doing double shifts - working 20 hours for multiple days a week - just to get by," he says.

Domiciliary care workers, who drive from client to client, are particularly squeezed by the rise in fuel costs. Some, but not all, are reimbursed by their agency. One carer, who did not want to be named, told openDemocracy that she was walking for hours a day between jobs because she can no longer afford to fill up her car.

Many of the people care workers look after are also vulnerable. "Quite often care workers turn up at a house and there's no milk or bread. So they're having to buy these elderly people basic necessities out of their own pocket, and then it can take weeks sometimes to get that money back," says Alan.

There are now more than 160,000 vacancies in the care sector, a shortage prompted by an exodus of workers. The top reasons given for leaving are low pay, poor working conditions and burnout, [according to a government survey](#).

The lack of carers has had a knock-on effect on hospitals, which are now having to keep patients on wards for longer rather than discharge them to a care setting.

"The hospital works in a circular flow. You interrupt any of that flow and you've got trouble," says Glenn Carrington, a senior paramedic for the East of England Ambulance Service. "I've been sat outside a hospital with a patient on board for nine hours with the whole fleet backed up behind me – and this is not just our hospital, this is nationwide."

Glenn can't remember a worse time for the ambulance service in the 36 years he's worked for it. Many of his colleagues are still reeling from the pandemic and have not had a real-terms pay rise since 2007.

"We might have forgotten about COVID, but COVID hasn't forgotten about us. We've got loads of staff still going down with COVID and even more with long COVID and burnout," he says.

Glenn is the chair of the Unison union branch for his region and also the Black members' officer. He says that Black and Asian ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to being impacted by the cost of living crisis as they disproportionately make up the lowest-paid jobs in the NHS. They were also more likely to be hospitalised and more likely to die from COVID compared to white people.

"COVID went through us like a dose of salts," he said. "It's horrible. I had COVID and I was fighting for my life. It took about 18 months to fully recover from that. I lost some dear family members too, and I haven't recovered from that, either."

The most painful part for Glenn was not being able to put them to rest in the way he would have wanted.

"I'm a West Indian and when one of our loved ones dies, especially a matriarch or patriarch, it's a big deal. You're talking about steel bands, you're talking about great big parties, big families. And we had to have eight people at our funerals. Eight," he says.

In January 2021, as the number of deaths recorded from COVID surpassed 100,000, Boris Johnson vowed in a speech to "remember the courage of countless working people – not just our amazing NHS and care workers, but shop workers, transport staff, pharmacists, teachers, police, armed forces emergency services and many others."

But now the pandemic has receded from headlines and the cost of living is at the forefront of people's concerns, many workers that the government previously praised for their sacrifices are finding that its rhetoric has turned.

When transport workers went on strike for better pay and conditions in June, condemnation followed quickly from ministers. The transport minister [Grant Shapps claimed](#) that "rapacious union barons" were trying to "blackmail" companies.

Robbie Marnell, a regional organiser for the GMB union, says workers are striking for their basic needs, rather than out of greed, as Shapps claims.

"The bus drivers I represent are providing a key service to the community but they can't afford to pay the bills and buy food for their families," he said. "There's lots of drivers suffering from long COVID now, too. Some of them have had to stop working altogether."

Despite struggling to get by, Robbie says the Merseyside bus drivers he works with still feel a great sense of pride about their jobs and that has motivated them to stay and organise for better pay and conditions – despite having more lucrative work as HGV drivers open to them.

Glenn feels the same, he has poured his life into the ambulance service: "It's heartbreaking what's

happening to it now.” The service isn’t recruiting fast enough to replace people leaving and he worries about his colleagues on the bottom of the ladder.

“I just hope that whoever becomes the [next Conservative leader](#) grows a conscience and helps them,” he added.

A Mitie spokesperson said: “Our people are what make our business exceptional and we are proud to offer industry leading benefits. All of our colleagues on this contract are paid at least the London Living Wage. During the pandemic, our customers’ buildings were operating at much lower occupancy, resulting in significantly reduced workloads. Therefore our colleagues were given comparable tasks to complete so they did not see any reduction in their working hours.”

Adam Bychawski

P.S.

- Open Democracy. 18 August 2022, 1.14pm:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/cost-of-living-covid-cleaners-carers-ambulance-transport/>