



# Tackling modern slavery through global supply chains

UNISON  
*the public service union*

We don't know who these workers are but they could easily be teachers, nurses or other public service workers forced to pick cotton during the harvest season in Uzbekistan, where the Government is infamous for enslaving its workers. Could our public service institutions be procuring uniforms, bedsheets and PPE made with cotton from Uzbekistan?



# Introduction

Despite slavery being abolished in the 19th century, it still exists everywhere. And after 4 decades of privatisation, deregulation and austerity, incidences of modern slavery are increasing.

At any given time in 2016, according to the International Labour Organisation, an estimated 40.3 million people were in modern slavery, including 24.9 million in forced labour and 15.4 million in forced marriage. Out of the 24.9 million people trapped in forced labour, 16 million are exploited in the private sector with women and girls disproportionately affected.

We cannot escape procuring goods produced in supply chains, whether sourced in the UK or abroad, that might have been made by people trapped in slavery. They mine the raw materials and make our electronic equipment, they farm the cotton and make our uniforms and personal protective clothing and they make the tools we use within our workplaces.

**With hundreds of billions of pounds spent on public procurement each year in the UK we have to ask if the public purse is contributing to or is complicit in practices that lead to modern slavery?**

This booklet explains what modern slavery is, why it exists, what the government's response is, how UNISON is working to tackle modern slavery and what you can do about it, including harnessing the public purse for good.

Dave Prentis  
General Secretary





# What is modern slavery?

Modern slavery is extremely complicated. There is not always a clear line between who is enslaved and who isn't. Ultimately it comes down to whether an exploited person has the ability to leave the situation they are in or not.

Photograph: Pete Pattison

Modern slavery is exploitative labour where one person has control of another person. It exists on a spectrum of exploitation. It can be hard to establish a clear line to define what constitutes slavery. However, if a person is forced to carry out work for which they didn't offer themselves voluntarily and they are not free to leave, it is slavery.

Someone is in slavery if they are:

- forced to work – through mental or physical threat
- owned or controlled by an 'employer', usually through actual or threat of, mental or physical abuse
- dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as 'property'
- physically constrained or has restrictions placed on his/her freedom of movement, including the confiscation of their passport.

Slavery can take many different forms, such as:

- The exploitation of migrant workers in conditions amounting to slavery
- Slavery in supply chains
- Human trafficking
- Forced labour and bonded labour
- Forced and early marriage
- Worst forms of child labour
- Descent-based slavery.

# Who is likely to be trapped in modern slavery?



Because modern slavery is about power and exploiting vulnerability, it knows no boundaries. Anyone anywhere can find themselves enslaved.



Slavery is a complex issue with complicated root causes. Ultimately it is about power relations and the ability of one person to exploit and grow the vulnerability of another. Anyone can find themselves in a situation of modern slavery.

Aside from being born into slavery, causes include discrimination, vulnerabilities like poverty, lack of education, lack of economic opportunities, migration status, living in countries that lack sufficient regulation as well as rule of law and many others.

### **Ana's story**

Ana was married when she was 15-years-old to a man twice her age. She suffered domestic violence for over five years. She had been told by her mother and mother-in-law that such abuse was “normal” and a wife’s duty to bear it. Ana did not have control over her life, suffered long-term abuse in her marriage and was not realistically able to leave her husband.

### **Sikasso's story**

Sikasso, born in Mali, West Africa, was 14 when he agreed to go to Cote D'Ivoire to earn ‘real money’. But when he arrived, he had to work for a month to pay off his bus fare. Then he was handed to an older man and forced to work on his cocoa farm with six other foreign workers. For three years, with no pay and long working days, Sikasso collected cassava and potatoes from the bush to survive. Eventually he ran away, still with no pay but managed to find another job paying enough money to return to Mali. But Sikasso refuses to return to his village as he is still empty handed.

*(Stories from Anti Slavery International)*



A large group of people, mostly young adults, are gathered in a room with red walls. They are holding up a large banner made of several pieces of fabric. The banner is divided into three horizontal sections. The top section is grey and has the word 'SUPPLY' in large, black, block letters. The middle section is white and has the word 'CHAIN' in large, black, block letters. The bottom section is light blue and has the word 'INJUSTICE' in large, black, block letters. The people are looking towards the camera, and some are smiling. The overall atmosphere is one of a public demonstration or protest.

## Why does modern slavery exist?

Like any crime, modern slavery flourishes where weak laws and gaps in governance and enforcement exist. After 40 years of world-wide neoliberal labour market deregulation, the underfunding of inspectorates and anti-trade union practices, the growth of modern slavery is unsurprising.



In today's global economy, goods and services are produced in very complex global supply chains built on a model of fast and low cost production.

Hundreds of sub-contracted companies are involved in the production of goods and this has led to a break down in the contractual relationship between the buyers of goods and services and the workers delivering them.

Brands and retailers relocate production by switching to suppliers who can produce for less. Some suppliers are even forced to produce at or below the cost of what it takes to produce their part of the item. This has led to countries deregulating their labour markets further and further in order to win foreign direct investment.

Poverty wages, excessive working hours, short-term temporary or casual labour contracts and fierce anti-union practices had already become the norm in the global south around 30 years ago.

This further obscures exploitation, leaving workers vulnerable to human rights abuses, including forced labour and human trafficking. As a result, the scope for labour brokering is expanded and it increases both voluntary migration and illegal people smuggling.

# Why have a UK Modern Slavery Act:

Modern slavery is everywhere, in the UK and globally; it can be found in supply chains providing food, furniture, sporting events, construction, promotional merchandising, electronics, our clothes and even our surgical instruments... everywhere. The only sustainable solution is for all workplaces to be unionised.



In response to high profile cases exposing the growth of slavery, in 2015, the British Government introduced the Modern Slavery Act. It applies to commercial organisations with a £36+ million annual turnover. However, whilst a good first step, it excludes public services and there are no penalties for non-compliance.

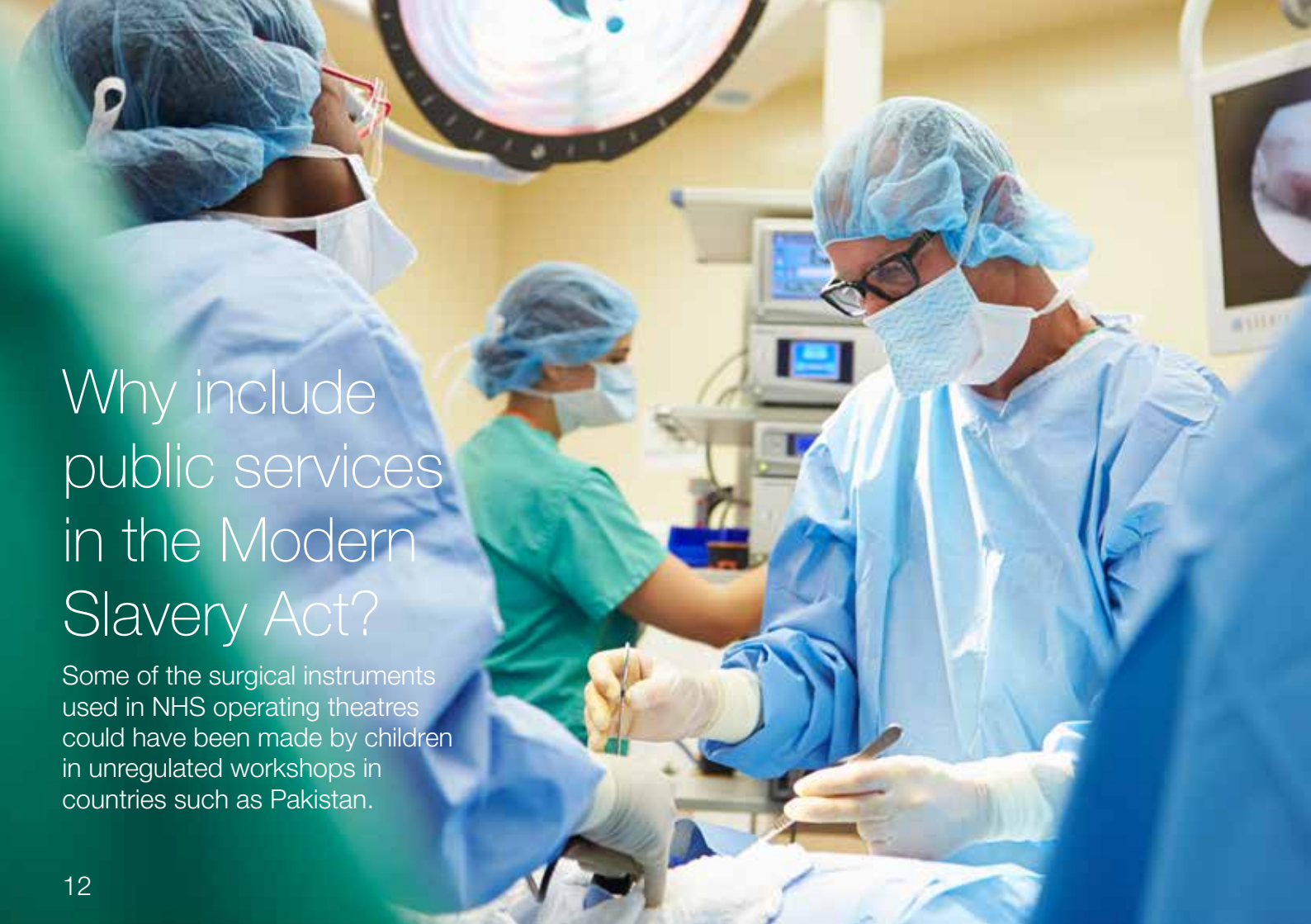
In recent years' a series of high profile cases have kept a spotlight on global supply chain exploitation. For example:

The 2013 Rana Plaza garment factory disaster that left a death toll of 1,130 and many more injured in Bangladesh;

Enslaving recruitment practices and abusive labour conditions in the construction sector in Qatar ahead of the 2020 FIFA World Cup;

In the electronics industry, the link between conflict, child labour and mining for electronic material components in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the spate of suicides in electronics factories in China in 2010.

The Modern Slavery Act aims to encourage businesses to take responsibility for their supply chains by ensuring no slavery, forced or child labour is involved in the production of goods in, or destined for the UK. But the Act only applies to commercial organisations, so public bodies are not covered by its 'transparency in supply chains' clause. This clause requires businesses to produce a modern slavery 'statement' but does not impose sanctions if no definite action is taken. Therefore whilst the Act has catalysed debate in business circles, in its current form, its impact is very limited.



# Why include public services in the Modern Slavery Act?

Some of the surgical instruments used in NHS operating theatres could have been made by children in unregulated workshops in countries such as Pakistan.



In 2016 there were over 17,000 officially published tenders worth a total of £1.6bn. Some of the top services contracts that are used by UNISON members were in IT, Business Services, Education and Training Services, Health Care, construction and community and social services. Source: Trussell.

Public service entities procure hundreds of billions of pounds of goods and services. Alone, Local Government procures around £60 billion a year and tender values are growing not falling.

Instead of impoverishing and enslaving people, this buying power could be used to improve how global supply chains operate. They could enable workers to claim their human and trade union rights and lift themselves out of poverty and vulnerability through decent work.

The government has issued framework guidance on public sector procurement and has produced a National Action Plan to implement a set of UN business and human rights responsibility principles applicable to governments and business. But they have the same weaknesses as the Modern Slavery Act.

Despite these failures, public service institutions including the Welsh Assembly Government, a few local authorities, some universities and others, have developed their own ethical procurement policies. Yet without robust government binding requirements quality is inconsistent and few are sufficiently resourced enough to achieve sustainable change.

# Electronic supply chains charging modern slavery

Night shift workers sleep at their workstations, in electronics factory owned by MSI (Kunshan) Co. A Taiwanese in China. There are claims of 12 hour days with 1 – 2 days rest per month in peak season, no sick or maternity pay, no toilet breaks and abusive management.



Recently the global electronics industry has become one of the largest in the global economy. There are an estimated 18 million electronics workers who generate 25% of global trade in manufactured goods. The scale of human rights abuses is just as big.

Electronics brands have rapidly become some of the most valuable companies in the world through outsourcing and off-shoring. Since the 1980's, brands have transferred labour intensive activities to low cost locations across the globe.

Brands drive a fast model of production. To meet their unrealistic demands, factories demand excessive overtime to complete orders and increasingly use temporary workers – often migrant, agency, or student – who are often paid less, have fewer benefits, and are more vulnerable. Extreme exploitation in the least and forms of slavery are not unusual. The abuse of the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining is normal.

*“We have to be in school to get accepted in the company. We are called On-the-Job Trainees but we do not attend lectures, because we are too tired after 12 hours of work every day. After one year, if we pass the evaluation, we can be hired as contractual workers. We are paid 75% of the minimum wage.”*

On-the-Job Trainee in a Philippines electronics factory, 2016

# Using collective buying power

Recently the global electronics industry has become one of the largest in the global economy. There are an estimated 18 million electronics workers who generate 25% of global trade in manufactured goods. But the scale of human rights abuses is just as big. In 2016 University of Sheffield People & Planet Society began campaigning to get the university to sign up to Electronics Watch. They haven't won yet but they won't stop until they do!





The mission of Electronics Watch is to help public sector organisations work together to protect the labour rights and safety of workers in their electronics supply chains more effectively than any single public buyer could accomplish on its own.

In one example, in Thailand, an Electronics Watch monitoring partner reported that Burmese migrant workers working in an electronics factory had their passports and other identity documents withheld. They were employed by subcontractors or through a labour broker and were charged illegal extortionate recruitment fees – making them at risk of forced labour or debt bondage.

Electronics Watch engaged with their members' electronics brand and the suppliers who run the factory. They encouraged the brand to intervene to ensure the immediate return of all identification documents and repayment of illegitimate recruitment fees. The brand responded quickly

and reports that this was underway arrived. The factory also directly hired the 5,000 workers.

Initially workers expressed satisfaction but during 2017 reports of brokers misbehaving again resurfaced, as did reports of the factory charging the workers for things the subcontracting agencies and brokers used to charge for.

Electronics Watch continues to work with its partners and through its members to achieve sustainable change. And the more members it gains, the more it can use that collective buying power to change the industry.

# Do you know where your work uniform comes from?

Globally, the garment industry is infamous for its severe labour exploitation. In the wake of the collapse of the Bangladesh Rana Plaza factory, 1,314 workers, mostly women, died when the factory collapsed due to weak health and safety laws and inspectorates, plus hostile attitudes to unions. The Bangladeshi Revolutionary Garment Workers Federation took to the streets to protest. Little did we know the tragedy would lead to the first ever legally binding industry agreement and a little more space for union organising.



The Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, took less than 90 seconds to collapse, killing 1,134 people. The length of the public's attention following a disaster is normally very short. But the campaigning spotlight has been kept firmly on the country's garment industry and is being used to drive change at the far end of a deeply flawed supply chain model.

The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, the first ever legally binding supply chain agreement between brands, government and unions anywhere, is designed to dramatically improve safety in 2,300 factories supplying western brands.

Now in its second phase, its impact is not insignificant. Fewer factories are death traps and (despite a hostile government) trade unions now have a significant national role. Brands are also being held accountable, with two major multinationals agreeing to pay millions of dollars in December and January 2017/18 after global unions accused them of failing to compel suppliers to fix their factories.

This would not be possible without the global trade union movement and its allies' sustained support. UNISON's members have consistently campaigned and through our International Development Fund project, the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers Federation (BRGWF) has grown its membership and recognition, become financially self-sustaining and developed its capacity to engage with brands and the Accord.





## Modern slavery in global sporting events

Migrant workers from South Asia talk about their working and living conditions to an international union delegation in 2014. Reports have shown that accommodation has consistently been in breach of Qatari laws and welfare standards. The workers' have been forced to live in squalid conditions.



When FIFA announced that Qatar had won the bid to host the 2022 World Cup it wasn't just controversial because it was shrouded in allegations of corruption or concerns about the heat that players and spectators would have to endure. There was another even more sinister cause for concern.

Around 95% of the Qatar workforce are migrant workers. In construction it is 99%. The men and women who come to Qatar for employment do so under the Kafala sponsorship system that enables employers to control their lives.

Workers cannot leave the country without their 'sponsors' permission and if the sponsorship is withdrawn they are deported without any ability to challenge it. As many migrant workers incur large debts to get to Qatar and their families are dependent on the wages that they send home, they are easily exploited, even more so as the law prevents them from forming or joining trade unions.

Workers are often lied to by recruiters about the standards in which they will live and work and the amount of wages they will earn. Their passports are confiscated by their employer and the identity documents they are given are often sub-standard, which makes them vulnerable to arrest. They also find themselves living in cramped, squalid conditions and suffer from late or non-payment of wages. Some are subjected to forced labour.



Eliminating modern slavery  
in global sporting events

Persistent campaigning at the international and national levels worldwide has led to the Qatari Government changing laws and cooperating with trade unions globally.

As part of their on-going ‘Global Fair Play Fair Games’ campaign the Building and Wood Workers’ International Federation (BWI) is actively campaigning for decent work, workers’ rights, and safe working conditions in Qatar. UNISON is currently supporting BWI’s efforts in outreaching to Filipino migrant workers in Qatar to inform them about labour laws and to provide assistance.

In 2016, after three years of high profile media campaigning and engagement, the BWI signed an agreement with the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy, the organization responsible for the delivery of the 2022 World Cup Tournament Projects to ensure health and safety and rights for migrant workers in relation to the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar.

Improvements to the law have also been gained relating for example, to entry, exit and residence of migrant workers and the establishment of Workers’ Dispute Resolution Committees. Domestic workers have also received positive legal changes.

Additionally, in 2017, the Qatari Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the International Labour Organisation aimed at improving a number of issues including ensuring wages are paid on time and arrears are systematically settled. The introduction of a minimum wage rate applicable to all workers has also been announced.

Whilst we question how much the Qatari government will honour their commitments, it is clear that without union campaigning, enslaved migrant workers would have no chance of escape.

# UNISON Walking Our Talk

As a commercial operation with a turnover of more than £36 million, as well as out of moral duty, UNISON was the first UK union to publish a Transparency in Supply Chains Modern Slavery Statement.

UNISON has been a Living Wage Accredited Employer for the past five years. We understand that our largest risks come from our third party supply chains. So all our suppliers must sign our Supplier Code of Conduct and not subcontract work without our agreement. All renewed and new contracts ensure Modern Slavery Act requirements are included. We are currently risk assessing our top 100 suppliers by sector, location and labour practices so we can focus attention on driving improvements in targeted higher risk areas.

We are also the first union to affiliate to Electronics Watch. This means they can add our buying power to other members' who share the same

electronics suppliers as us. This enables them to undertake advocacy work, monitor the supply chain and work to ensure exploited workers receive remedy.

UNISON's central procurement team receive training in procurement ethics and the requirements of the Modern Slavery Act. Information has been circulated to all staff to raise awareness. Whilst we lack resources, our commitment is strong, we'll keep learning and we plan to undertake specific projects that show how to 'walk the talk'.





# How you can play your part in eliminating modern slavery

We know the pressure austerity brings you, how constraining the Trade Union Bill is and that budgets are too tight. But public purse savings should never be at the cost of human rights. If possible, you can play a role, however big or small, by

## **Learning more:**

- Read our Responsible Buying in Public Services Branch Guide
- Read our report into local government and ethical procurement
- The Ethical Trading Initiative offers a free place to trade unionists on each course it runs, it also has lots of free material, including a responsible purchasing practices guide.

## **Taking action:**

Get your branch to affiliate to Anti-Slavery International (ASI) and to sign the ASI Charter

- Find out if your workplace has a procurement policy that fits UNISON's guidance
- If the policy doesn't include the right to Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining, ask your employer to amend it – slavery will not end for good unless workers are able to self-organise and collectively negotiate with their employers
- Contact [i.relations@UNISON.co.uk](mailto:i.relations@UNISON.co.uk) to let us know what you are doing in your workplace or if you have any ideas you want to take forward or requests for support.

How can I identify that someone is in slavery  
and what should I do?



The government has made modern slavery a high profile issue but UNISON is concerned it hasn't invested enough in support and follow-up. So what are the signs of slavery and what should you do about it?

Slavery is often hidden and can be difficult to identify, but there are few pointers. Someone in slavery might:

- appear to be in the control of someone else and reluctant to interact with others
- not have personal identification on them
- have few personal belongings, wear the same clothes every day or wear unsuitable clothes for work
- not be able to move around freely
- be reluctant to talk to strangers or the authorities
- appear frightened, withdrawn, or show signs of physical or psychological abuse

- dropped off and collected for work always in the same way, especially at unusual times, i.e. very early or late at night.

If you suspect someone may be living in slavery, contact your UNISON branch. Ask them to contact the local council or MP and migrant community organisations. They can also contact the Modern Slavery Helpline on 0800 0121 700, the local police or Crime Stoppers. Ask them to track what happens and to identify the relevant union the person/people could join and facilitate their introduction. Do not try to intervene on your own as it can make the situation of that person worse.

At a national level, UNISON works with Flex ([labourexploitation.org.uk](http://labourexploitation.org.uk)) and Anti-Slavery International ([antislavery.org](http://antislavery.org)).

Photo: Michael Hylton/Anti-Slavery International



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