

Blacklisting ruined lives of thousands of construction workers, say MPs

Shadow business secretary, Chuka Umunna, says inquiry is needed to ensure practice of blacklisting is not still happening



Tessa Jowell said blacklisting was 'antipathetic' to the way industrial relations had been handled in building the Stratford site for the London Games. Photograph: David Levene

Matthew Taylor

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Thousands of construction workers have had their lives ruined by the "secret, insidious, shameful practice" of blacklisting, which MPs have called a national scandal.

The shadow business secretary, Chuka Umunna, told parliament that secret files held on thousands of construction workers had resulted in them being denied work because they had once raised legitimate health and safety concerns or belonged to a trade union.

Umunna said there were also serious allegations that the police and security services had supplied information for the list and that it had been used on several high profile, publicly funded projects including the Olympics.

"This further underlines the need for a full government investigation into blacklisting, an investigation that should also consider the role of the police and other such authorities ... The sadness is that we cannot say with confidence that these practices are still not continuing and that is why action is needed."

Labour said that half of the top 20 construction companies were involved with the blacklisting company, the Construction Association, in 2009, paying an annual £3,000 a year subscription plus £2.20 for each blacklist check.

Ian Kerr, chief officer of the Consulting Association, told a committee of MPs last year **that firms had used the blacklist in relation to the Olympic Park and projects including Portcullis House in Westminster, the Admiralty, the Ministry of Defence HQ in Whitehall and Wembley stadium.**

Dame Tessa Jowell, the former Olympics minister, said blacklisting was "antipathetic" to the model way industrial relations had been handled in building the Stratford site for the London Games but a contractor still checked the **Consulting Association** database.

John McDonnell, Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington, said: "This goes on today, just because you're a trade unionist, you stand up for health and safety or simply because you want to ensure justice and fairness at work. I want the inquiry to examine all those things in the past but I want an

inquiry that opens up the doors and invites people to come forward with evidence."

Earlier at prime minister's questions, David Cameron said blacklisting of construction workers was a "completely unacceptable practice".

"We've seen no evidence the blacklisting regulations introduced are not doing their job and the company responsible was shut down in 2009.

"But let me say this: I do welcome the openness and frankness that Labour are using an Opposition Day debate to look at something that went wrong while they were in office."

The business secretary, Vince Cable, said blacklisting as a practice was "thoroughly objectionable and indefensible", while the health and safety issues in the construction sector were extremely important.

Cable pledged to investigate the issue "if there is any evidence that we can investigate" and appealed for anyone with evidence of blacklisting to come forward.

"I am concerned to read that there is abuse taking place, or indeed even that there may be," he said.

He urged MPs and trade unions with information to "bring it forward, because innuendo isn't helpful, we need evidence".

Employment relations minister Jo Swinson said blacklisting was an appalling practice and acknowledged its impact on individuals and their families.

She said: "The Scottish affairs select committee is obviously taking evidence on this issue at the moment and we will look very carefully at the report that they provide."

Swinson said that once the committee had finished its investigation she would "make sure that if there is any evidence that illegal blacklisting is continuing to occur I will absolutely ensure it is properly investigated".

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