

ARTICLE IN THE MIRROR ON LINE

By Andrew Penman

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Laughing in the face of the justice system seems to be routine for one category of - company bosses – the ones who employ illegal immigrants. They avoid paying penalties issued by the Home Office by the simple tactic of shutting down their firms.

Take Kaher Zaman, 48, who lives in a detached mansion in the pretty West Sussex village of Storrington. In 2013 the Home Office issued a £25,000 civil penalty after five illegal workers were discovered at one of his Indian restaurants. He resigned as a director of Zaman & Co (UK) Limited, which was taken over by Sofik Miah, 46.

The following year another four illegal workers were discovered at the restaurant, resulting in an £80,000 penalty. And, by the by, Miah got done for fiddling housing benefit and was given 120 hours' unpaid work by Worthing magistrates.

Then, in 2015, the company was put into liquidation, with both Home Office penalties unpaid. Two weeks ago, Zaman was banned from being a company director for five years, but has continued in the business regardless. The chain of three restaurants now operates under a new company name, IndoBangla Cuisine Limited, with a relative who lives with him as director – Momotaz Zaman.

But it is certificates bearing Zaman's name that I saw plastered over the walls at the Storrington restaurant where he arrived for work in a Range Rover. When asked why the penalties had not been paid he replied: "I don't have to say anything, do I?"

It's worth mentioning that among the losers in this are the immigrants themselves. Zaman housed them in an overcrowded flat with no drinking water and no proper fire escape. The council issued him with a prohibition order which he ignored and in 2015 he was fined £3,334 by Worthing magistrates court after admitting breaching it.

Sadly, there are plenty more cases like this. In Exeter, Mohammed Hossain ran Argee Bhajee Limited, which was caught employing five illegal workers. He was given a penalty of £32,500, none of which was paid and the company went into liquidation. In Aberdeen, one illegal worker was found at Elite Restaurants North-East Limited, run by Anis Tomirun. The £15,000 penalty was still outstanding when the company was liquidated. In Blackpool, Pauline Lai's company Flyde Restaurants was given a £50,000 penalty after immigration officers found five illegal workers at her Chinese eatery. A fraction of the penalty was paid and £49,201 was outstanding when the company was liquidated. This restaurant has a grubby past. In 2010, Ms Lai and her company were fined £2,200 each for food hygiene offences including having mouldy equipment.

In London, Badamgul Khan ran food outlet Garv Limited, which hadn't paid any of its £60,000 penalty for employing six illegal workers when it folded. The Insolvency Service report noted: "Garv ceased trading as it could not continue its business due to the removal of cheap labour." That statement highlights another loser from this racket – legitimate businesses that play by the rules and have to compete with rivals that use illegal tactics to keep their costs down. Another London case is Mandarin Kitchen Limited, where UK Border Agency officers found illegal workers. None of its £10,000 penalty was paid and now the company is no more. These cases amount to penalties of £272,500, of which just £798 has been paid. The bosses have not quite got off scot free, though. In the past few weeks they have all been banned from being company directors for between five and eight years.

In 2015-16, the latest year for which figures are available, 2,594 penalties were issued for employing illegal workers. The total came to £46.2million, of which just £12.5million was paid.

A spokesman for the Home Office insisted: "We robustly pursue debts owed by employers of illegal immigrants." He added: "Illegal working cheats the taxpayer, undercuts honest employers and denies legitimate job seekers employment opportunities." On that, at least, I think we can all agree.