

## Activity 7 : - Why Join Unite? Making the case a role for all reps

### Why People Join Trade Unions

I joined Unite after being messed about something terrible at the store where I worked. Shifts changed at short or no notice and I had to sort out child care. Well, I joined Unite and although there weren't many of us at first we soon began to make a difference and others joined. Now the managers talk to the union first, before they do anything. Jackie, Shop Worker and Unite member.

My employer was intent on transferring work to another part of the country. Because we were organised we got them to talk to us and it turned out that the costs of transferring the jobs actually didn't make any sense. If it hadn't been for Unite, I'd be out of a job right now. Terry, Distribution Worker and Unite member.

I've always been a low paid worker. No qualifications, you see. Then, after a lot of years of believing that unions never did anything, I heard about a numeracy and literacy programme Unite were putting on. I joined the union and I've taken the first steps to getting a NVQ in catering. Maybe I'll be the next Gordon Ramsay. Who knows? What I do know is that if it hadn't been for Unite, I'd still be washing pots and struggling to read the newspaper. Andy, Catering Worker and Unite Rep.

I'd been getting a lot of racial abuse at work. They said it was just a laugh, but it didn't seem like that to me. It wasn't until the Unite rep found out that anything changed. I wasn't a member then but the rep reported the abuse to management and got things done. Sorted out the whole thing. Hemin, Garment Worker and Unite member.

When I was a student I worked at a big supermarket chain in the holidays. While I was there I had an accident and hurt myself badly on the wrist. I had to go to hospital and have stitches put in, and I missed two days of work. The company treated me really badly ... because I wasn't in the union and didn't know my rights. If I had been a Unite member I would have had someone to help me get my sick pay and the union could have helped me make a claim for compensation against the company. When I left university I worked for a company where Unite was recognised. I immediately saw the benefits of being in a union so I joined. I only wished I'd known about Unite sooner. Naomi, Unite member.

I suppose I became a Unite member because I was curious about how it was some workers got more than others. I wanted to know how these sort of things were decided. I joined Unite and after a while I became a rep. I like working with the company and I also like making sure our members get a fair deal. Ali, Council Worker and Unite Rep.

When my mum went into hospital I asked my employer for leave of absence to visit and look after her for a bit when she got home. They were sympathetic but wouldn't help. It was only when the Unite rep got involved that I got the leave I was entitled to. If it hadn't been for the union I would have been stuck and so would my mum. Alice, Care Assistant and Unite member.

## Reasons why workers are better off in unions:

**Value for money** – Most union contributions represent only around half a percent of workers' earnings but the pay back is considerably greater.

**Better pay** – especially for ethnic minority and women workers – trade union collective bargaining produces a better rate of pay for workers. Earnings are often as much as 15 per cent higher in workplaces where the bulk of the workforce is covered by collective bargaining compared to in non-unionised workplaces. Moreover, Black and Asian trade unionists earn almost a third more than their non-union counterparts. For white workers the union premium is ten per cent.

**Pensions** – Workplaces are more likely to have a pension scheme where a trade union is recognised for the purposes of collective bargaining.

**Sick pay** – Workers in unionised workplaces are more likely to get sick pay paid at higher than the statutory minimum than those in non-unionised workplaces.

More annual leave, more equal opportunities and family-friendly working, better job security, better health and safety, better legal compensation and more and higher quality training are all benefits that unionised workers get compared to their non-unionised counterparts.

**Other membership benefits** – Unions offer additional fringe membership benefits such as cheaper mortgages and insurance, holiday clubs, shopping discounts, credit cards, discounted car breakdown membership and so on.

**Public sector and pay** - The bulk of trade union members in the UK work in the public sector (almost three in five, 58.8 per cent) as opposed to the private sector, where union membership density stands at only 16.6 per cent (one in six).

Collective agreement coverage in the public sector is 69.0 per cent, three times greater than in the private sector. Trade unions are present in 86.8 per cent of public sector workplaces in the United Kingdom.

The TUC along with unions such as Unite, GMB and UNISON is concerned that, at a time when city bonuses and top directors' pay are at an all-time high, some of the UK's lowest paid workers are being expected to take what is in effect a pay cut. This is because of government policy to keep down public sector pay deals while private sector pay – particularly for the fat cats at the top – is left unchecked.

Below inflation pay will also widen the gender pay gap. This is because of the high proportion of women in the public sector workforce. The public sector accounts for around a third of total employment in the UK. Around two-thirds (65 per cent) of public sector workers are women, compared with two-fifths (42 per cent) in the private sector. Women make up 53 per cent of the civil service workforce, 73 per cent of local government employees and 77 per cent of NHS staff. The gender pay gap in the public sector stands at 13.6 per cent on average in hourly earnings. In the private sector the average gender pay gap stands at 22.3 per cent. The public sector gender pay gap has widened from 13.2 per cent since April 2005. There are signs of slippage on the commitment to equality audits, with the Cabinet Office no longer monitoring progress in the civil service. Such problems, allied to the pay discipline, will serve to widen further the gender pay gap and damage efforts to promote equality within the public sector. Those low paid workers who are not in a union will be even worse off, with the pay gap for them increasing wider still. All of the above show why it is vital for workers in the public sector to have a strong trade union fighting their cause. For workers in the 13.2 per cent of public sector workplaces where trade unions are not present, their economic future is bleak.

# Keeping members informed at work

People will judge Unite by what it is doing. But people won't know what the union is doing unless the Unite workplace team has a system for communicating at work. A communication system doesn't need to be complex, but it needs to work. Poor communications could mean people will get their news about the Unite from the wrong sources e.g. antiunion newspapers. There are a number of ways you can get your message out and some will depend on what it is you have to say.

## Face to face

**For:** effective person to person. It allows members to comment and ask questions. Information affecting everyone might need to be communicated at bigger meetings, especially if a decision is required.

**Against:** time consuming. Not always possible to reach everyone on a multi-site workplace, or a mobile workforce. You may have to negotiate time to meet in larger groups.

## Union noticeboard

**For:** you can choose what goes on it. It can be somewhere for people to go to find information if they cannot contact you. Make sure it includes a list of union rep contact details.

**Against:** the union team will have to produce most notices. The board will need to be kept up to- date or people will stop using it.

## Workplace union newsletter

**For:** gets out the message as the union team wants it. Allows for conversation if delivered by hand and can aid recruitment. Urgent information can be distributed quickly. Members acting as distributors help with union organising. Keep newsletters short and regular. Pin them on the noticeboard.

**Against:** photocopying or print costs. There will need to be computing skills within the union team and if you are using employer facilities there could be issues. Appropriate trade union facilities will need to be negotiated.

## Dedicated website / Social media presence

**For:** can be linked to the Unite websites at [HYPERLINK](http://www.unite.org.uk)

<http://www.unite.org.uk> [www.unite.org.uk](http://www.unite.org.uk) or [www.unionreps.org.uk](http://www.unionreps.org.uk). Immediate, constant and can be linked to on-line recruitment.

**Against:** needs constant updating. Requires computing skills, and also requires those you want to access the site to have the skills and equipment to do so. It doesn't involve face-to-face contact and can be a poor substitute for talking to people.

## Texting

**For:** almost everyone has a mobile phone.

**Against:** Could be expensive. Limited to those contacts whose phone numbers you have.

## **Employer email system/E-newsletter**

**For:** free access. It gets the message out to people quickly. Useful in workplaces where people are desk based.

**Against:** You will need an agreement covering the arrangements. Can become a convenient substitute for face-to-face contact and make the union remote from the workforce.

## **Social media or social menace? Working safely online**

The use of computers and the internet in particular, are now an integral part of our daily lives. Many of us will have access to a computer at work, and often at home, or even on the move via our mobile phones. The growing popularity of social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and more recently the use of Twitter and SnapChat has raised the risks of many Unite members experiencing potentially serious disciplinary or even legal repercussions through the inappropriate use (if only inadvertently) of these new ways of communicating.

Although many employers are reasonable about the use of IT in the workplace for personal reasons, there is a growing awareness of how its misuse may be highly detrimental to the employing organisation, and monitoring or even outright bans are not now uncommon.

This briefing is a reminder to Unite members of the risks to which they may be exposed if they use Facebook or Twitter, at work and even sometimes at home. It gives advice on some essential do's and don'ts.

### **Communicating online**

Having finished a long day at work, sharing bits of gossip or your opinions over the internet with friends, in the comfort of your own home, is a common past-time for many people. But it is very tempting to forget that electronic communications are not as private as a telephone call or letter, and there are potentially some real dangers in describing incidents, people or situations that you have encountered at work, that struck you as funny, stressful or exciting. Never forget that laws, such as defamation and harassment, still apply irrespective of where you happen to be communicating. Obviously, it is recognised that everyone is entitled to a life outside of work, but that doesn't by any means preclude either your employer taking account of some of your actions occurring in your home or social environments. In other words, what you do outside of work may be relevant to your employment and your employer.

Social network sites make personal information publicly accessible, allowing people to upload a profile with personal details, photos, videos and notes and to then link with their friends' profiles. This raises immediate concerns about privacy. In response to some highly publicised cases of misuse by employees, some employers now ban social network sites being used by employees in the workplace, arguing that they place the organisation at risk because:

- it affects the performance of their organisation's IT systems
- it brings the employer into disrepute by the posting of damaging remarks whether about the employer, their clients or other employees
- it reduces the employees' productivity as they use part of the day to access the websites talking to friends
- it gives rise to risks of legal claims against the employer who is generally vicariously liable for the actions of its staff.



## **Through the inappropriate use of the internet you may:**

- breach your organisation's internet policy (Check what is in place)
- breach your organisation's harassment policy
- Damage your employer's reputation in such a way as to constitute a breach of your employment contract, leading to disciplinary action and possible dismissal.

So here are some critical do's and don'ts to remember when using IT or social media at home or at work:

- Don't make disparaging remarks about your organisation, its clients or fellow employees on a social network site even if your page is private!
- Avoid any identification of your employer on your profile page of a social network site.
- Don't make any remarks on a social network site that may embarrass your employing organisation. In particular, do not air your grievances where countless others might be able to read all about it.
- Don't use the social networking site or other non-work related sites when you are supposed to be working.
- Never take private film or photos, whether on phone cameras or otherwise, of your workplace and post them on your Social network page.
- Never post sexually explicit, racially offensive, homophobic or other unlawfully discriminatory remarks on your Social network pages.
- Always read and comply with your employer's policy on IT use in the workplace.
- Never access or download inappropriate websites at work, such as those containing sexually explicit material, or gambling sites.
- Observe your employer's bullying, harassment and dignity policies when composing emails to colleagues at work.

A final thought that could keep you safe, never post anything on your social network page you would not send directly to your manager or employer by letter or email.

*Adapted from guidance provided by Chris Cox Director of Legal Services Royal College of Nursing 2009*