

# THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

## INTRODUCTION

The NASUWT is the largest teachers' union in the UK. The Union is the largest in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the fastest growing in Scotland.

The NASUWT has members in all sectors from early years to further education and represents teachers in all roles, including headteachers and others with leadership responsibilities.

The NASUWT is neither linked to nor does it pay an affiliation fee to any political party. The Union's aim is to serve the best interests of teachers, no matter what party forms the Government at national or local level.

## BENEFITS OF TRADE UNIONS TO SOCIETY

Free and active trade unions are a key indicator of a healthy democracy and provide some of the best examples of voluntary social organisations effectively challenging or defending the status quo on behalf of their members.

Trade unions are frequently at the forefront of wider struggles for political change, democracy and social justice. Since the 1970s, the wider civil society role of trade unions has developed on a wide range of issues, including human rights, development and education, environmental issues, equality matters and corporate accountability.

According to *Unions in the Community: a survey of union representatives*, trade union representatives are heavily involved in campaigning and other activities outside of work.

Trade union representatives are eight times more likely than the general population to engage in voluntary work and give more of their time to community organisations.

The survey found that apart from the benefits to industrial relations/workplace relations in general:

- 8% of trade union representatives are school governors;
- 19% of trade union representatives undertake other voluntary work in their local communities; and
- 20% of trade union representatives spend around five hours each week on community activities.

Trade union members and representatives are at the heart of civil society and building stronger communities.

## BENEFITS OF TRADE UNIONS TO EMPLOYERS

There is clear evidence that employers benefit considerably if their staff are in a union.

Unions help employers:

- to better communicate, consult and negotiate with their employees;
- with the identification and resolution of safety issues in the workplace;
- to organise and secure the support of employees in training and development;
- to improve industrial relations, staff morale and commitment;

- in ‘greening’ the workplace and making a positive contribution toward challenging climate change;
- to deliver better and more efficient products and services for service users and customers.

The Department of Trade and Industry publication *Workplace representatives: a review of their facilities and facility time*, issued in January 2007, calculated that:

- union workplace representatives have an annual productivity impact of between £3.5bn and £10bn on the economy;
- Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are worth £94m-£146m in terms of increased productivity;
- union safety representatives save the economy upwards of £578m each year by reducing risks of lost productivity arising from occupational injuries and work-related illnesses.

## BENEFITS OF TRADE UNIONS TO EMPLOYEES

Almost every improvement in workplace conditions – for example, equality legislation, including equal pay laws, stronger health and safety legislation, statutory redundancy pay, the National Minimum Wage and better rights for agency workers – came about following pressure from trade unions.

### On a more routine basis:

- where trade unions are organised, employees benefit from more favourable pay and conditions of service (including pay, pensions, holiday and flexible working entitlements), lower rates of absence due to sickness, accidents and injury at work, access to more and better training opportunities and enhanced job satisfaction:
  - the average union member gets seven days more paid holiday (30 days of annual leave, excluding bank holidays) than the average non-member;
  - rates of workplace accidents and serious injury are twice as high for non-union members compared to those in workplaces where there are union safety representatives;
- unions secure more than £320m a year in compensation for members who suffer injuries as a result of employer negligence or who are discriminated against at work.

## BENEFITS OF TRADE UNIONS TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In the education sector, the NASUWT, the largest teachers’ union in the UK, has made a major difference in terms of improving educational outcomes and provision for children and young people.

The work undertaken by the NASUWT, working constructively with government, has contributed to securing a world-class workforce in schools, ending the crisis in teacher recruitment and retention and making teaching the profession of first choice for graduates.

Ofsted, England’s school inspectorate body, calculated that there had been a ‘significant’ improvement in educational standards and achievement in schools following the introduction of workforce reforms agreed between trade unions, employers and government.

Estyn, the school inspection body for Wales, concluded that the programme of reforms introduced by unions, employers and government has had ‘a very positive effect in schools’ in terms of improved standards of teaching and learning.

The independent National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has also confirmed that as a result of the constructive agreements reached between unions, employers and government, there is an improved focus in schools on teaching and learning and better professional collaboration and teamwork for the benefit of children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## HOW TRADE UNIONS WORK

Employees in the same workplace will inevitably get together from time to time to talk about common problems. The issues most likely to come up are pay and pensions, conditions of service, safety, unfair treatment of a group or individual, or simply the way work is organised. Trade unions provide a structured means for employees to do this, in accordance with their self-determined and democratic procedures.

Union members will usually elect a representative to speak on their behalf. This representative will then raise their concerns with the employer. Where a union has a recognition agreement with the employer, they will have regular formal discussions. This helps to build trust and confidence between employers and employees.

Good employers welcome these arrangements. They understand that it is better for employees to have an organised means by which problems and concerns can be addressed, rather than allowing them to escalate as a result of the inappropriate intervention or inactivity of supervisors or line managers.

Unions encourage their members to take part in democratic and collective decision making on workplace issues, which assists the employer in informed decision making.

## WORKING TOGETHER

Unions contribute to organisational success by working with employers to plan for the future and manage change.

Working together means both sides can explore ways of bringing benefits to employees, which improve the enterprise. Most dynamic and forward-thinking organisations work routinely with the unions to keep their workforce informed on crucial issues.

A trade union is said to be recognised when an employer agrees to negotiate with it on pay and working conditions on behalf of a particular group of workers. The subsequent negotiation process is known as collective bargaining.

Most union recognition arrangements are established by employers voluntarily agreeing to recognise one or more trade unions. Such voluntary recognition provides maximum flexibility to the parties.

To operate effectively, trade union representatives need to be able to access release from their normal job to undertake their duties as representatives. Consequently, representatives receive statutory rights to facility time with pay to undertake their functions.

The importance of facility time for union duties is supported by business leaders and government. The joint CBI and TUC report *How workplaces can gain from modern union representation* confirmed that 'representatives need appropriate time and facilities to undertake their workplace activities'.

It is estimated that trade union representatives in the public sector contribute a total of up to 100,000 unpaid hours of their own time each week to carry out their union duties. This is time that directly benefits services and the people who work in them.

The Acas *Code of Practice on Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities* states that 'There are positive benefits for employers, employees and for union members in encouraging the efficient performance of union representatives' work, for example in aiding the resolution of problems and conflicts at work' and that 'in order to perform effectively, representatives need to have reasonable paid time off from their normal job in appropriate circumstances.'

## FURTHER INFORMATION

go online [www.nasuwat.org.uk](http://www.nasuwat.org.uk).



35 Young Street North Lane, Edinburgh EH2 4JD  
Tel: 0131 226 8480 Fax: 0131 226 8489  
E-mail: [rc-scotland@mail.nasuw.org.uk](mailto:rc-scotland@mail.nasuw.org.uk)  
Website: [www.nasuw.org.uk](http://www.nasuw.org.uk)