

How can union members make their workplaces become greener & lower carbon?

Lessons from Carbon Trust/TUC Greenworkplace Project 06/07

This briefing is divided into 2 sections - the first outlines some of the workplace issues where environmental improvements may be needed. The second summarises some of the key actions that union members can take to address these issues. More detailed guidance and resources are available at our website, www.sustainableworkplace.co.uk. We welcome feedback - join the debate at www.unionreps.org.uk

Issues

Energy

Climate change is a growing concern to us all. We don't need to be scientists to talk to others about climate change, it's much more important to talk about our experiences and concerns. But, briefly, the science says that by burning oil, coal and gas (fossil fuels), we are releasing too much carbon dioxide (CO₂). This and other 'greenhouse gases' like methane collect in the earth's atmosphere, trapping the sun's heat. We are already seeing more extreme weather as a result - heat waves, hurricanes, flooding and droughts. Many scientists now think we have only 10 years to stop rising CO₂ emissions. Otherwise they fear devastating 'runaway' climate change, accelerated by harm to the ice, seas and forests that currently absorb or reflect much of our CO₂.

What can we do about this?

International action is important - but developing countries like China will only agree to reducing their emissions if developed countries, like the UK, also take strong action now to reduce our own emissions. Individuals, unions, communities, employers and governments all have a role. And improving energy efficiency is key - most governments agree it is the quickest way to reduce CO₂ emissions, whilst we work to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels.

Saving energy at work is important, because more CO₂ emissions are generated in the workplace than in the home (particularly as we get 'greener' in our home lives). And, also, because rising energy costs affect an organisation's bottom line. Check out www.thecarbontrust.co.uk, which has helpful factsheets, checklists and case studies, including sector-specific information for most types of employers. They also have details of grants/loans, tax breaks, accreditation schemes, and (for larger employers) free consultancy, all of which can support employers becoming more energy efficient. (for similar services relating to waste and water, see www.envirowise.co.uk). Some areas that you might want to consider include:

Insulation

Unsexy, but extremely effective in making the work environment more comfortable, and in reducing the heating and cooling bills that are often a big part of

employers costs. A huge difference can be made even by simple draught-proofing.

Lighting & heating

Maximum individual controllability of heating, cooling and lighting allows greater personal comfort and potentially, greater energy efficiency - particularly if works are going on anyway. As a minimum, necessary controls and switches should be clearly labeled.

The most readily available form of 'renewable' energy is 'passive solar', ie using the sun's natural heat and light wisely, through workplace design and use. Thoughtful consideration of how the sun, shading and natural ventilation is used, in consultation with both experts and with the workforce (preferably together), can make the difference between a pleasant and productive working environment, and one that is neither of those things. This issue is likely to become increasingly important as the climate warms. It's also important that heat or ventilation sources aren't blocked (which could be dangerous as well as wasteful) and that thermostats are appropriately sited. 19 degrees is warm enough for most people, and over 24 degrees is too warm.

Large workplaces with on-site generators / boilers / substations are well-placed to install Combined Heat & Power (CHP) generators, which are particularly efficient when round-the-clock power is required.

Equipment

Not only does equipment and lighting left on produce emissions and waste money, it also heats up the workplace - especially if it is left on overnight.

Often people are not quite sure whether something is really 'off', or whether they are allowed to turn it off, or whether someone else will come round and turn it off. An environmental rep could ask these kind of detailed questions, area by area, check any areas of doubt with management, and use stickers or agree systems to help people take control of their power usage at work.

Most equipment should be labeled with the amount of energy it uses, or you can get a simple-to-use energy monitor for around £15. Purchasing/replacement policies for equipment and IT should prioritise ease of use, safety and running costs/energy efficiency (eg A++, EnergyStar), as well as an ethical supply chain. Properly consulting the workforce before any major purchasing decisions such as changes to layout, equipment or systems, will minimise the waste that can be generated from ill-thought through changes that then have to be undone.

As importantly, the employer should ensure that any new equipment is installed in a way that makes it easy to use its eco-features (for example, enabling any eco-friendly options, and ensuring staff are fully trained on its use.

Environmental reps can play a key role in staff inductions, explaining the environmental policies of the workplace and how to raise any concerns.) Automatic options like motion sensor lights in low use areas, and automatic power down of PCs after working hours, are popular with staff and increasingly widely implemented - they are also often recommended in Carbon Trust expert surveys.

Finally, action and learning at work can encourage greater energy and money savings at home, and vice versa. For more on energy saving at home see www.theyellowhouse.org (how one family converted an ordinary council house into an eco-home) and www.est.org.uk (has info on grants available).

Reduce, re-use, recycle

Recycling is often the first thing colleagues will think of when asked about how 'green' their workplace is - after all, the contents of bins are often there for all to see before they head off to landfill. A 'reduce, re-use and recycle' approach to products at work will protect the planet by using fewer scarce resources. It will also use less energy (and therefore carbon) than new products made from virgin materials.

- Currently, the UK's paper use equates to cutting down a forest that would cover the whole of Wales, every single year. As well as providing habitats for wildlife, trees can stop climate change by absorbing CO₂.
- Most UK waste still ends up in landfill sites. Apart from concerns about toxins entering the soil and water, as waste rots in landfill, it creates methane, which contributes to global warming even more powerfully than CO₂.

Are paper, plastic, cans, glass and all other major waste streams routinely recycled? If not, check out www.wasteonline.org.uk and www.envirowise.gov.uk for guidance on improving recycling schemes. Other waste, from mobile phones to unwanted IT equipment and furniture, can all be recycled, through schemes like www.envirofone.co.uk, and www.freecycle.org.uk Recycling schemes vary by area, and may be council or privately-run, but a good one should share information with your organisation such as - exactly what can and can't be recycled (for example, only some paper schemes accept cardboard), where the waste is handled (to put to rest any concerns about it ending up in rubbish dumps or shipped round the world), and how much recyclable and non-recyclable waste has been produced by your organisation. The TUC reduced its landfill waste by 40% in 18 months through raising awareness and negotiating for improved facilities.

Even better than recycling is reducing the use of resources (including energy) in the first place, by having a well-thought through purchasing strategy. PCS union (www.pcs.org.uk/gw) has good guidance on ensuring that its supply chain is open and transparent about its environmental and social impact. For example, the

organisation could commit to: buying recycled and / or recyclable paper and other products where possible, ensuring new printers and copiers can (and are set to) print on both sides, or setting an ambitious 'zero waste' target.

Water

Even in Britain, we cannot take access to clean water for granted. Climate change is already making wetter areas more prone to flooding, but drier areas more prone to drought. (Al Gore's film explains this well!). Also, water uses a lot of 'embodied' energy to be treated, pumped, delivered, and perhaps heated, so being 'waterwise' (see www.waterwise.org.uk for tips on water-saving) will also help stop runaway climate change. More ambitious schemes like rain-water harvesting are perhaps not the first step to take in most areas of the UK at this time.

Unison is campaigning to ensure that all workers have access to clean drinking water, without having to rely on carbon-intensive plastic or glass bottles. See www.unison.org.uk. At Corus, staff have been involved in an initiative that has saved 20% of water used at the Trostre steel works, with substantial costs savings, and the TUC has ended its use of glass bottles.

Transport

Travel makes up a third of the UK's carbon footprint and travel for and to work is a major part of that. www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/fleet/ can give guidance to those who have to drive for work. For a greener, easier commute, a good starting point is <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/sustainable/travelplans/work/resourcepackemployers/> which has guidance on how to survey existing transport arrangements. Suggestions for helping employees switch to lower carbon alternatives, include incentives for bike use, walking, or car sharing, allowing flexible working, or campaigning for improved public transport.

Finally workers worried about the impact of their holiday travel could check out www.seat61.com and push for longer holiday entitlements - one employer has agreed an extra days holiday if staff travel by train not plane!

Food

Food is one of the largest parts of our 'carbon footprint' both at home and at work, and often arouses strong feelings. These days we hear a lot about 'food miles', particularly air-transport of food, but there are other important considerations as well. If your organisation provides catering for staff or clients, does it have well-trained, well-paid staff producing decent meals? Or does it rely too heavily on carbon-intensive pre-prepared, processed, packaged and/or frozen foods? If there isn't on-site catering, does the organisation provide sufficient time and facilities to access a good choice of food options? Or are they too reliant on power-hungry vending machines? Clearly, these issues also overlap with Health and Safety at work, as we see increasing evidence of the links between diet and disease.

Action

Creating demand and creating momentum from the bottom is needed to make these things happen. Greener, cleaner, more sustainable workplaces benefit us all, at work, in our neighbouring communities, and in international solidarity. A Prospect survey found 90% of members wanted unions to do more on the environment.

Elect environmental reps Those involved in the TUC/Carbon Trust Greenworkplaces project have included shop stewards, H&S reps, and those new to union activism. It has proved very important to get facilities time for training, periodic workplace inspections (both regular and in response to specific concerns); meetings, paperwork and communication.

Union environmental reps can act as a conduit between management and members/staff, feeding concerns, suggestions and responses in both directions, and working with the workforce and management to develop best environmental practice, particularly in estates and human resource management. They can help review or shape environmental policies and initiatives, and help ensure that such policies are properly understood, fit for purpose, and can be put into practical effect at each workplace.

Training The TUC runs courses for union members interested in the environmental reps role, details at www.unionlearn.org.uk. Some unions have their own courses too, and the GW project has helped develop tailored carbon cutting courses for particular workplaces, using the Carbon Trust's '5 steps to carbon management' and their existing auditing tools, and giving reps the chance to work with Carbon Trust experts. The TUC is also developing an online course during 2007. The courses develop a trade union approach, an action plan for each workplace, and enable workers to share experiences.

Communication We all look to others for action - 'I will if you will' - but messages from the organisation about what *it* is doing, often become wallpaper. Workers want facts and targets that they can understand, that focus on a particular area, that can be updated, and that are personally meaningful and tangible. For example, one GW project explained that the workplace produced 10 times more CO₂ than all their homes and personal lives put together, and set a target to reduce this by 10%. Another got figures on night-time electricity consumption in their building, and through publicising these figures, halved night-time consumption over 18 months.

Communication needs to be 2-way, through reps, meetings, events, committees, surveys and newsletters. Several of the GW project reps have set up regular e-newsletters, and we have encouraged all reps to use a survey to establish colleagues concerns. An important rule is that no-one should be made to feel guilty; the focus should be on removing barriers to 'green' behaviour.

Commitment from the top *and* the grassroots is important. It is linked to information availability, because people at all levels are more likely to act if they understand the financial and local environmental impact of measures, and they may all have important information about causes and impacts. It's important to have both a senior champion and an operational

manager with clear responsibility to make this information transparent.

Audit To be able to improve performance you need to know where you're starting from - ie an audit of environmental performance. There are many different ways of auditing and measuring environmental performance. In the Greenworkplaces projects, we have trained members to adapt existing checklists, for example from the Carbon Trust, and use them for union purposes.

Open day Awareness raising events such as open days are great ways of getting people thinking about the environment at home and at work. At the TUC and Scottish Power, reps have shown 'An Inconvenient Truth' during work hours. Reps in the GW projects have also arranged for organisations such as the local FOE or Energy Saving agency (through the council) to come in to GW workplaces and give talks, advice and materials. Or you could invite a speaker along to the branch.

Place at the table Who is responsible for environmental policy and practice? Often there is a committee or working party combining (for example) Facilities / Energy Environment manager, Corporate Social Responsibility/PR dept, and possibly Human Resources (especially if they are also looking at travel). We have established a local committee or working group with union involvement, or are working towards that, in all the current GW projects.

Environmental Agreement The next step for the committees and working groups is environmental agreements. An overarching agreement could cover a commitment to employee involvement, reps, facilities and training; the issues to be covered; mutual responsibilities and procedures for dealing with issues; clear objectives and monitoring policies; and links with H&S and other policies and structures. For more ideas, see the checklist, overleaf. If you do negotiate an agreement on any environmental issue, be sure to send a copy to www.lrd.org.uk so that others can benefit too.

Maintaining enthusiasm Remember that small steps add up to large impacts. If organisations achieve cost savings, a proportion could be reserved for further 'green' investment, or for rewarding staff as a whole. Increasingly, many organisations are also looking at *what* they do, for example a 'full life-cycle' analysis of their products, as well as *how* they do it, and this is an area that the workforce could have an important voice in. You and your branch could also get involved in campaigning, for example by asking your MP to sign Early Day Motion 1125 for rights for environmental reps (www.sustainableworkplace.co.uk), also PCS & Unison have affiliated to the Icount campaign (www.icount.org.uk).

Finding out more - general

See the environmental 'footprint' of your own lifestyle at www.redefiningprogress.org.uk and encourage colleagues to do the same.

Have a look at your employer's reports and websites, particularly on 'Corporate Social Responsibility'. You might also want to google or search specific websites like www.bbc.co.uk www.guardian.co.uk www.defra.gov.uk, www.foe.org.uk, www.greenpeace.org.uk, www.theyworkforyou.co.uk, using your organisation's name,

+ terms like +“climate change” OR “carbon” (if “environment” throws up irrelevant results).

Your union can help with research, press searches, etc, and can advise you of their own environmental policies and who is responsible for this area.

If you work for a large company, check out www.cdproject.net (Carbon Disclosure Project), which is a voluntary reporting standard. Any member of the public, including employees, has the right to request information about an organisation under the Environmental Information Regulations - see <http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/opengov/eir/index.htm>.

You can request information from www.environment-agency.gov.uk. You may also be able to use the Information and Consultation Regulations, or European Works Councils, see www.tuc.org.uk for more on this.

www.netregs.gov.uk explains environmental regulations in plain language, and has a good section on the various environmental management schemes (EMAS, ISO14001, etc).

Finding out more – within your organisation

Here are some suggestions for questions you might consider asking colleagues or management. *To start with, pick one or two areas to focus on that particularly interest you or your colleagues, or that you think are important or could be ‘quick wins’.* You might want to carry out a survey to assess the most important areas to your colleagues, or have a meeting to discuss what’s already been done and what’s outstanding.

In thinking about your own priorities, you might also want to consider:

- who knows about this/where can we get the info from - internally, externally?
- who else makes the decision on this?
- who is this a priority for, and why – eg, does the issue have a high profile externally or internally; a big environmental impact; H&S, working time or other human resource implications; or is it a possible ‘quick win’?

CHECKLIST

- Does the organisation understand, and explain, its carbon footprint? What key environmental indicators does it publish?
- Does your organisation currently have written environmental policies or Environmental Management Systems, eg EMAS, ISO14001, Carbon Trust Carbon Management Scheme? (Including involvement in Emissions Trading Schemes)?
- Has it developed a carbon or environmental management plan, which should include a business case for change; calculation of payback times for investment; a plan for delivery; a way of prioritizing projects, communicating and monitoring impacts; and a commitment to work with staff and union(s)?
- Has the organisation had a Carbon Trust, or other environmental audit?

- Has it implemented the recommendations?
- Who has responsibility for progress (overall, and at operational level) – an individual, a committee?
- Are there automatic power reducing features, eg motion sensor lights, timers on water coolers, IT power downs?
- Are all bulbs low energy? (Compact or modern fluorescent), and are all PC monitors flat screen?
- Is lighting on in areas, or at times of day, when there’s enough daylight? Why? Are lights/windows dirty or failing?
- Is there a commitment to :
 - buy equipment and goods only when necessary, and following consultation with staff, ensuring purchases meet the latest energy standards, are sourced from suppliers with good employment and environmental standards, and are easy and safe to use?
 - ensure eco-options are enabled and staff are trained on using equipment in an eco-friendly way?
 - ensure equipment is regularly serviced, and clearly labeled?
 - continually seek ways to minimise the use of resources including energy, paper, raw materials, packaging & disposable items, particularly when new systems, practices or locations are introduced?
- Is temperature an issue, either generally or at particular times of day?
- Is heating or cooling on in areas, or at times of year/day, when it doesn’t need to be – or simultaneously?
- Are people opening doors and windows even when cooling/heating is operating? Why?
- Is the workplace properly insulated and draught-proofed?
- Are the thermostats in the right places and set to the right temperature (19°C for heating, 24°C for cooling)?
- Can individuals control or influence the heating/cooling and lighting in their workspace?
- Is heating or ventilation blocked by furniture/ equipment?
- Is any equipment left on when not in use? Why?
- Is everything recycled that can be?
- Is everything bought recycled where possible?
- Are water saving measures in place?
- Is there an up to date travel plan which promotes low-carbon transport and reduces unnecessary travel, negotiated with the union?
- Are the catering arrangements satisfactory or is food over-processed or packaged?
- Does the organisation seek ways to support staff saving energy and resources at home?
- Is offsetting only carried out as a last resort after looking at energy saving, sourcing a green electricity supplier or tariff, *and* onsite renewable / CHP generation?