

Publications and further information

The TUC publishes a wide range of reports, leaflets, books and DVDs. We also produce a downloadable educational resource pack for schools and youth organisations, *A Better Way to Work*, to help young people prepare for the world of work.

We have an extensive website at www.tuc.org.uk. This contains press statements, campaign news, policy briefings, statistical information and publications for sale. Register online for free email news updates matching your areas of interest.

Contact details:

Trades Union Congress
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS

Tel: 020 7636 4030
Fax: 020 7636 0632
www.tuc.org.uk



If you do not belong to a union and want to know which one to join, phone the TUC 'Join a Union' line on:

0870 600 4882

Calls are charged at the national rate.

For more information about the TUC's different activities try one of our websites:

www.tuc.org.uk (main site)

www.worksmart.org.uk (help and advice for everyone at work)

www.unionlearn.org.uk (for learners and learning reps)

www.unionhistory.info (TUC archives online)



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Trade unions at work

what they are and what they do

Including a guide to the Trades Union Congress

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Introduction

the world of work

Work dominates modern life.

In Britain today there are more than 29 million people in paid employment.

Most people spend up to a quarter of their lives at work – longer, on average, than anywhere else in Europe.

Work can be satisfying, enjoyable and rewarding, and most employers treat their workers fairly. But some do not.

When the TUC ran a bad bosses hotline over 5,000 people in one week called to complain about the way they were treated by their employer.

And even the best bosses can make mistakes from time to time.

That is where unions come in.

Unions exist to help people at work.

Unions want to make the workplace a better place.

This pamphlet explains how unions work in modern Britain: the job they do for their members; the way they help boost business; and how they help make Britain a better place to live and work.



Photo: Simon Weller

Section 1

trade unions today

More than six million people belong to TUC unions: that is almost one worker in every five. Wherever people work there are union members – or potential union members.

Trade unionists do all sorts of jobs: they include factory workers and computer programmers; office staff and shop assistants; bus drivers and airline pilots; teachers and soap stars; musicians and motor mechanics; footballers and chiropractors.

Union members include men and women; full-time and part-time workers; people in big businesses, and those in small ones; people who work for the Government and those who work for themselves.

Union members are no different to anyone else, except they tend to be better paid and have better working conditions because they have someone to stand up for them.

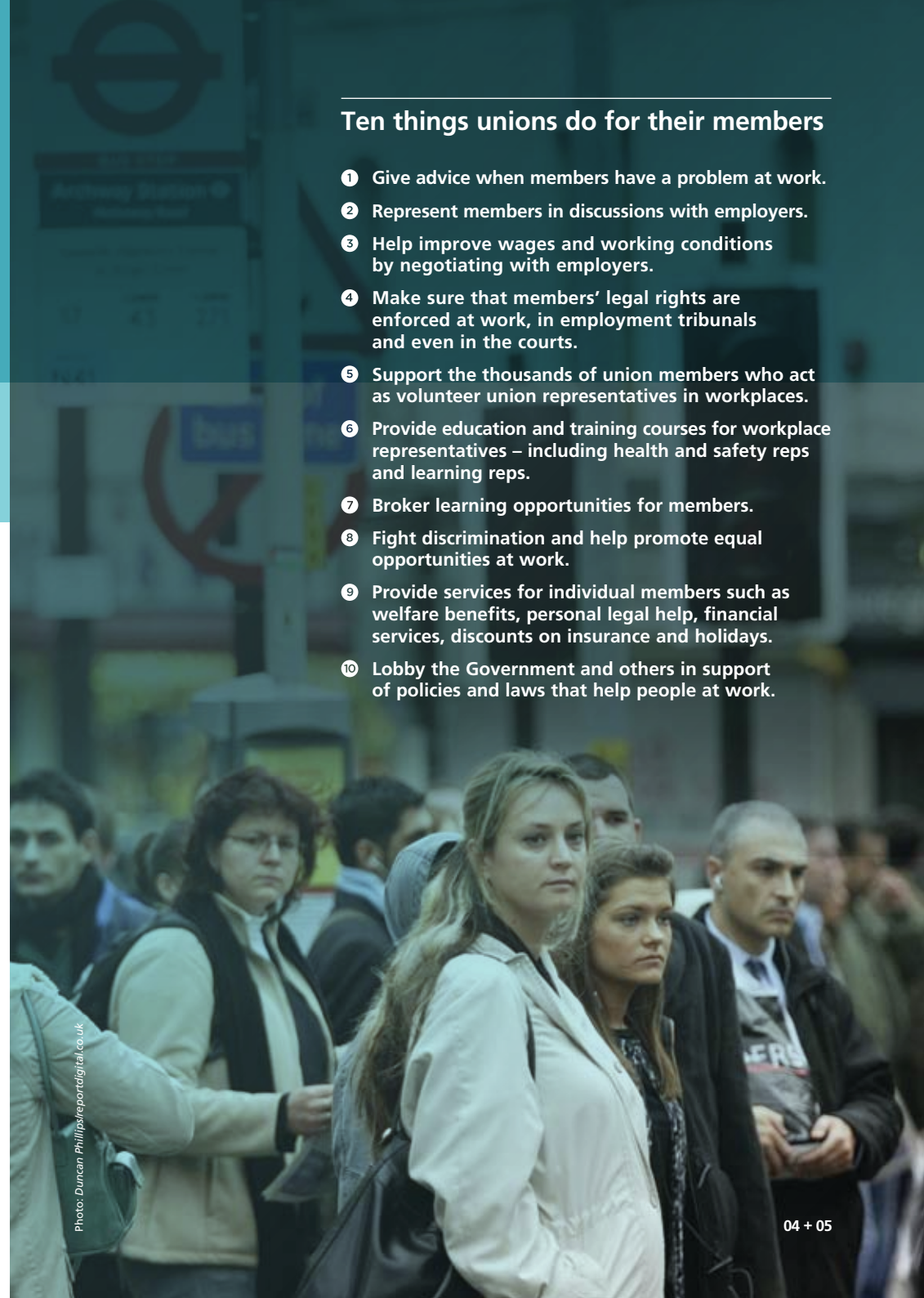
CASE STUDY

Pensions for part-timers

After a legal ruling that part-time workers had the right to be members of occupational pension schemes, many unions joined the TUC in applying to the courts to ensure that the new rights were backdated. After a five-year battle in the courts, involving 22 test cases and culminating in a ruling by the European Court of Justice, thousands of part-timers won the right to claim benefits they had been denied for years.

Ten things unions do for their members

- 1 Give advice when members have a problem at work.
- 2 Represent members in discussions with employers.
- 3 Help improve wages and working conditions by negotiating with employers.
- 4 Make sure that members' legal rights are enforced at work, in employment tribunals and even in the courts.
- 5 Support the thousands of union members who act as volunteer union representatives in workplaces.
- 6 Provide education and training courses for workplace representatives – including health and safety reps and learning reps.
- 7 Broker learning opportunities for members.
- 8 Fight discrimination and help promote equal opportunities at work.
- 9 Provide services for individual members such as welfare benefits, personal legal help, financial services, discounts on insurance and holidays.
- 10 Lobby the Government and others in support of policies and laws that help people at work.



Five facts about unions

- 1 The vast majority of the top 50 companies have formal bargaining agreements with unions. This is called 'recognition'.
- 2 Unions win more than £320m a year in compensation for members who suffer injuries, or who are discriminated against at work. Accident rates are higher for non-union members, who are twice as likely to be seriously injured as those who work in places where there are union safety representatives.
- 3 The average union member earns more than the average non-member. For example, in private companies the union 'mark-up' gives members an extra 7p in the £.
- 4 The average union member gets seven days more paid holiday (30 days of annual leave, excluding bank holidays) than the average non-member (23 days).
- 5 Almost every improvement in workplace conditions – for example, 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.

CASE STUDY

Sick building syndrome

In Tower Hamlets, safety representative Adrian Grieves noticed high levels of sickness absence in two new buildings. He raised this with management and asked the Health and Safety Executive to investigate. This led to an improvement notice being served and a major refurbishment, including a new ventilation system that has dramatically decreased levels of sickness.

Why unions?

Unions work on the simple principle that while an employer might be able to ignore the views of a single worker, if all workers speak with one voice the employer has to take notice. Unions encourage their members to take part in collective decisions on workplace issues and these views are then put to the employer.

CASE STUDY

No more needles

In North Lanarkshire safety representative Jim Cowan found that caretakers in tower blocks were finding discarded needles and were expected to deal with them despite having no training or special equipment. After the union intervened specialist disposal was arranged by the council.

Unions internationally

- There have been unions in Britain for well over a hundred years.
- Today there are unions in virtually every country in the world.
- The International Trade Union Confederation, which represents unions around the world, currently has 168 million members in 155 countries.
- In countries as far apart as Zimbabwe and Bangladesh unions are at the forefront of campaigns for major social change.



How unions work

Union members in the same workplace will get together from time to time to talk about common problems. The issues most likely to come up are pay and pensions, safety, unfair treatment of a group or individual, or simply the way work is organised. The union members will usually elect someone to speak on their behalf – a shop steward or ‘representative’. This representative – or ‘rep’ – will then discuss their concerns with management. Where the union has a recognition agreement with management they will have regular formal discussions.

In bigger workplaces there will be a number of representatives, sometimes from different unions, speaking on behalf of different groups of workers. And in very big workplaces some of these union representatives will spend much of their working day dealing with union business, talking to management and solving problems on behalf of their members.

Most sensible employers welcome these arrangements. They understand it is better for workers to have an independent means of dealing with problems rather than letting them fester, or hoping they will be sorted out by the supervisors or line managers who are sometimes the cause of the problems.

Working together

Unions contribute to the success of an enterprise by helping employers plan for the future and manage change. Sometimes companies and unions have to find imaginative solutions to changes in demand for goods and services. Working together means both sides can explore ways of bringing benefits to employees as well as the enterprise.

By law, where more than 10 per cent of the workforce request it, employers must inform and consult workers about issues in the organisation, but some of the most dynamic companies work routinely with the unions to keep their workforce informed on crucial issues.

In large companies that operate in more than one EU country European Works Councils, in which unions reps often play a part, are consulted where big changes or redundancies are planned.

Learning with unions

Unions aren't just about work: they also help members get on in life by offering learning and skills opportunities. These include literacy, numeracy and language courses, and the chance to progress in further and higher education. A union's specialist adviser in this area is called a union learning rep.



Beyond the workplace

Union members from different workplaces in the same area meet in union branches. There will often be regional committees too, and in all cases a national body elected by the members to run the union. This is usually called the national executive.

Branch representatives from around the country meet regularly in conference to set the union's policy. This is the union's equivalent of Parliament.

Unions are democratic bodies. Everyone from the office representative to the general secretary is subject to election by the members.

All but the smallest unions employ full-time staff. Organisers cover an industry or area and will help the elected office or workplace representatives, often taking part in negotiations themselves. In the bigger unions there are also research staff, and specialist officers covering issues like health and safety, training or equal opportunities.

Where the money comes from

Unions are financed by their members' contributions. Each union sets its own scale of subscription rates. The average amount is currently between £10 and £18 a month. Most members have their union subs deducted direct from their pay by agreement with their employer (a system known as 'check-off'). Others pay by direct debit.

The changing membership

Some people join a union when they start work and don't leave until they retire.

But today most people change jobs a number of times in their careers. Sometimes that will mean a change of union. The result is a rapid turnover in membership. Some unions say they need to recruit the equivalent of a quarter of their membership each year just to keep pace.

Changing ways of working have had a big impact on the composition of unions. A generation ago, when manufacturing was strong, the typical union member was a man who worked full time in a big firm doing a manual job. Today there are more part-time workers in unions, more women and more people doing professional jobs in small- to medium-sized enterprises.

A further challenge for unions is the changing nature of employment, with some employers moving to an increasing use of agency, casual and migrant workers, many of whom have fewer legal rights than permanent staff. There are many vulnerable workers in Britain today who need the protection of unions.

Partly for these reasons union membership fell from 12 million in 1979 to just over six-and-a-half million in 1997, but has remained at that level ever since. Unions remain the largest voluntary organisations in the country. And by international standards, while we have a lower proportion of workers in unions than some countries (like Sweden and Austria), we still have a higher proportion than others (such as France or the United States).

In order to bring the benefits of union membership to new workers, unions have dedicated organisers, whose role is to recruit and retain members, and encourage them to become active in the union, for example by standing as workplace reps. An Organising Academy trains new organisers to take the union message into tough workplaces.

CASE STUDY

Dyslexia brought to book

Over the years transport assistant Tracy Dyson became adept at covering up her dyslexia. Although she wanted to overcome her fear of reading, it was only with the encouragement of her union learning rep that she gained the confidence to step into a learning centre. Now, having gained a string of qualifications, her only regret is that she didn't start sooner.



Photo: Mark Thompson

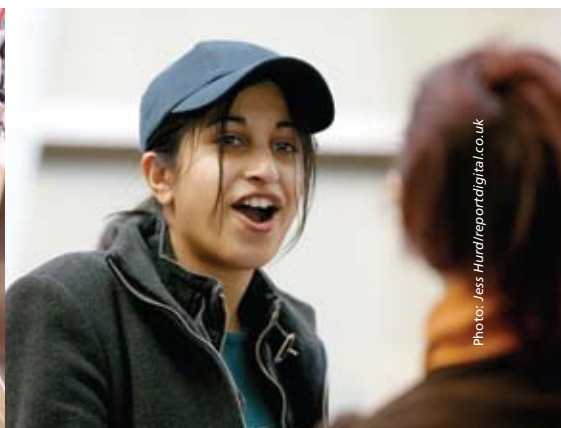


Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Section 2

the Trades Union Congress

Just as workers benefit by joining together in a union, so unions gain strength by acting together through the TUC – the Trades Union Congress.

The TUC has a direct impact on the lives of working people in many ways. For example, we offer advice on workplace rights at the WorkSMART website www.worksmart.org.uk. We also publish a large range of guidance materials, and run campaigns to influence public, employer and government opinion on issues like pensions and the environment.

But a large part of the TUC's work involves assisting and co-ordinating the activities and services of its unions.

Ten things the TUC does for its unions

The TUC:

- 1 brings unions together to draw up common policies on issues like the economy, employment law, equality at work, and other workplace issues
- 2 presses the Government to implement policies that will benefit people at work
- 3 campaigns on economic and social issues
- 4 represents working people on public bodies
- 5 represents British workers on international bodies, in the European Union and at the UN employment body – the International Labour Organisation
- 6 carries out research on a wide range of employment-related issues
- 7 runs an extensive training and education programme for union representatives
- 8 helps unions develop new services for their members
- 9 helps unions avoid clashes with each other
- 10 builds links with other trade union bodies worldwide.



The TUC unions

There are around 60 unions in the TUC – the number varies from year to year as unions merge and new members join.

The largest, Unite, is the result of a series of recent mergers and has nearly 1.5 million members. Its members work mainly in manufacturing, the utilities, construction and energy supply, as well as in administrative, technical and supervisory roles in both the public and private sectors.

The second largest is UNISON with well over a million members. Most of these work in local government, healthcare, the water, gas and electricity industries, further and higher education, transport, the voluntary sector and housing associations.

One other union has more than 500,000 members: the GMB. Its membership also spans the public and private sectors and includes workers in industries as diverse as textiles, hotels and catering, food production, chemicals, ship building and energy.

A further nine unions each have more than 100,000 members. These tend to limit their membership to specific areas. Unions in this group cover retailing, communications, the civil service, teaching and construction.

The remaining 40–50 unions vary in size from more than 70,000 members to just a handful. Most regard themselves as specialist unions. There are several in the entertainment industry, some in transport and others for professional workers in the health services, such as radiographers, or physiotherapists. Some unions, especially in the finance sector, confine their membership to employees of one particular company.

Some of these unions have belonged to the TUC for a hundred years or more. Others have joined very recently.

Two unions have recently established formal links with sister unions overseas. Unite has joined with the American United Steelworkers to form Workers Uniting and Nautilus, representing maritime professionals, has linked up with its Dutch equivalent to form a new Anglo-Dutch union.

A full list of all TUC member unions, with addresses, membership figures and contact names is published every year in the TUC Directory. You can also find it on the TUC website www.tuc.org.uk.



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

The TUC runs campaigns to influence public, employer and government opinion.

Five TUC campaign successes

- 1 In 1948 the NHS was created as a result of union campaigning.
- 2 In 1970 the Equal Pay Act made it illegal for employers to give a woman worker different pay and conditions to a male one doing work of equal value.
- 3 In 1999 the National Minimum Wage was established to protect low-paid workers.
- 4 In 1999 thanks to union pressure at European level, a limit was placed on working hours, largely as a health and safety measure. This was quickly followed by a minimum holiday entitlement.
- 5 In 2007 the no-smoking ban was introduced in public areas in response to union arguments that workers were risking their health.

Five facts about the TUC's history

- 1 The TUC was founded in Manchester in 1868.
- 2 The Labour Party was established by the TUC unions so that working people could have their own representatives in Parliament. However, the TUC itself is not affiliated to the Labour Party.
- 3 The TUC helped rebuild the German trade union movement after the second world war.
- 4 The TUC, with the Labour Party, owned a popular daily newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, until 1964 when it was sold. It later became *The Sun*.
- 5 Its London headquarters, Congress House, is a Grade 2 listed building. The internal courtyard is dominated by a giant 'pieta' style statue of a woman holding her dead son: it was carved on the spot by world-famous artist Jacob Epstein as a war memorial.



Epstein's monolithic statue inside Congress House is easily viewed by all those using the building.



Photos: TUC library



Photos: Unichrome

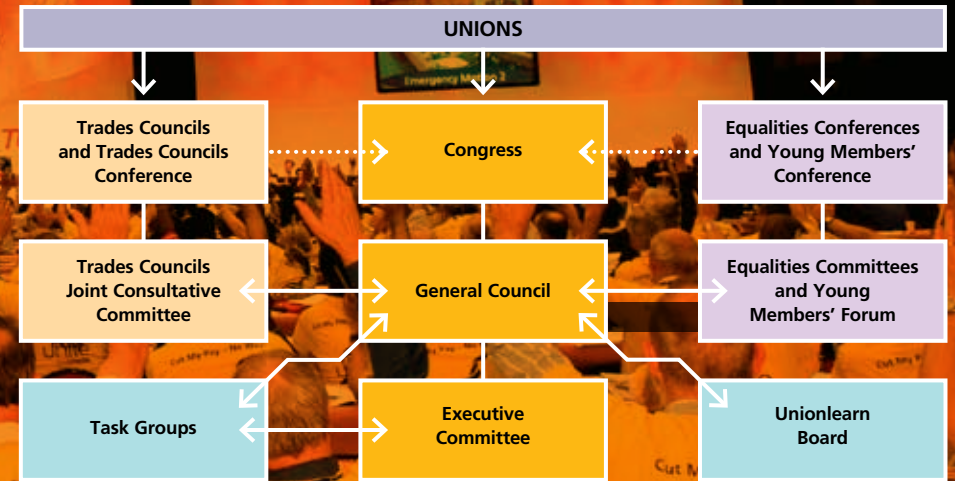


Photo: Jess Hurd / reportdigital.co.uk

How the TUC works

Congress

TUC policy is set by the annual Congress, which meets for four days of debate each year in early September. All unions are entitled to be represented – the size of their delegation depends on the size of the union. Congress considers motions (resolutions) submitted by unions and receives a report from the General Council.

General Council

Between Congresses the General Council makes TUC policy. It meets once every two months, oversees the TUC work programme and sanctions new initiatives. The larger unions are automatically represented on the General Council. The smaller unions ballot for a number of reserved places. There are also seats reserved for women and black workers, and one representative each for young workers; disabled workers; and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender workers. The total membership of the General Council is five, including the General Secretary.

The Executive Committee

The General Council appoints some of its members to form an Executive Committee. This meets monthly. It implements and develops policy, manages the TUC financial affairs and deals with any urgent action. Its membership is updated by the General Council at their first meeting after Congress.

President

The post-Congress meeting of the General Council elects the President for that Congress year. The President chairs meetings of the General Council and the Executive and is consulted by the General Secretary on all major issues. They also preside over Congress at the end of their year of office.

Task Groups and Committees

Reports are given to the General Council by a number of other bodies besides the Executive. There are task groups set up by the General Council to deal with specific areas of policy.

And there are committees that provide a link to other parts of the trade union movement such as the Women's Committee, which includes members elected by the annual TUC Women's Conference as well as members of the General Council. The Race Relations Committee, the Disability Committee and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Committee have similar links to their own conferences. The Young Members' Forum also reports to the General Council, as does the body representing Trades Union Councils – trade union bodies that bring activists together from different unions at local level. Trades Union Councils do valuable campaigning work in the community. They are mostly registered with the TUC.

Political and campaigning work

The TUC is not affiliated to the Labour Party, and neither are many of its member unions. That means that at election time the TUC cannot endorse a particular party by name. However it can point to policies that it believes would be positive for workers' rights, or to social cohesion and community welfare. Conversely it can campaign politically against policies that it believes would be injurious.

The TUC's five principal aims are to:

- 1 raise the quality of working life
- 2 achieve greater equality in society and within unions
- 3 boost trade union organisation and representation
- 4 improve economic performance alongside greater social justice at home and abroad
- 5 increase workers' life chances through lifelong learning.

General Secretary

The General Secretary is the one full-time member of the General Council. Brendan Barber was elected to this post in late 2002. He is the lead spokesperson for the organisation and is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the TUC. Two other senior members of staff are appointed by the General Council. They are the Deputy General Secretary, Frances O'Grady, and the Assistant General Secretary, Kay Carberry.

TUC staff

Most of the TUC staff of over 320 work at the head office, Congress House, in central London. The others are based in the regions, and in Scotland, Wales and Brussels.

The TUC in the regions

TUC activities in the regions are co-ordinated by full-time TUC regional secretaries in each of the six English regions. Union representatives in each region meet regularly through TUC regional councils. A similar arrangement applies in Wales – though the Wales Trades Union Council also has its own annual conference.

The TUC also works closely with the Scottish TUC and the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, although these are separate organisations.

Centres for the people who are unemployed

A network of around 100 TUC Centres for the Unemployed acts as a voice for those out of work and provides advice and assistance on welfare rights, education and representation.

Unionlearn

The TUC has its own learning and skills organisation called unionlearn. Its role is to foster arrangements at national and local level for union reps, officers and members to develop their learning and skills. Each year it trains some 55,000 reps, safety reps and officers and has trained and supported 24,000 specialist union learning reps. Unionlearn is based at Congress House with a team of professionals in each region.

Political lobbying

The TUC provides regular briefing materials to MPs. It seeks to win support irrespective of their party. Some of our unions belong to the Labour Party, paying affiliation fees and having votes at the Party conference. Other unions are strictly non-political.

The TUC and Europe

The TUC has an office in Brussels, which keeps in close touch with developments in the European Commission and its institutions. The TUC also works closely with the European TUC, which represents trade union organisations across Europe, and takes part in European-level discussions with employer organisations as a means of drawing up agreements on workplace issues that can be implemented in all member states. The TUC has been working with Europe for more than 20 years. It wants a strengthened 'social Europe' to match the single market.

Unionlearn is the part of the TUC that delivers learning and skills for union officers, reps and members



Glossary

Discrimination

Since 1975, it has been illegal for people to be discriminated against because of their sex; and since 1976 because of their colour, race, nationality or ethnic origin. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 made it unlawful to discriminate on grounds of disability.

Laws introduced in 2003 have made it illegal to discriminate on grounds of sexual orientation (that is, being lesbian, gay, bisexual or heterosexual) or on grounds of religion and belief, and age discrimination was outlawed in 2006. Transgender people have been protected by the Sex Discrimination Act since 1999.

The many different anti-discrimination laws and regulations are being consolidated into a single law, the Equality Act.

Education and training

The TUC trains union representatives who broker deals with learning providers. Most unions also run training courses for full-time officers and lay representatives on issues like employment rights, health and safety and information technology. The TUC helps unions run courses for members that contribute to their personal and professional development. Unions work with employers to make sure that employees have access to training at work, and support government training schemes like the Apprenticeships scheme.

Health and safety

Since the introduction of the Health & Safety at Work Act of 1974 all employers with more than five employees are required to have a written safety policy. They must also have clearly communicated arrangements for putting it into effect. Trade unions provide the expertise at the workplace on the legal requirements and standards for their industry.

Where they are recognised by employers, unions have the right to appoint safety reps and employers have a duty to consult them.

Negotiation

Negotiation is where union representatives talk over issues with management. If there is a difference of opinion between management and union leaders then negotiation is about finding a solution.

Organising

'Organising' describes how unions recruit new members and build strong union communities in workplaces. Active members who have shared and agreed goals give unions greater bargaining powers in negotiations with employers.

The TUC's Organising Academy aims to serve as a model of training excellence for organisers. Trainees spend a year learning the craft of union organising, mostly on the job with sponsoring unions, but also in the classroom.

Personal legal help

Most unions help with legal issues such as securing compensation for personal injury, especially work-related injury and illness, and traffic accidents. Some will help with issues like public liability and criminal negligence. Some unions also help with personal matters like housing, making a will or debt advice. They offer financial discounts such as discounts on mortgages and insurance and loans, and welfare benefits – one of the trade union movement's earliest functions was to look after members in difficulty. Some unions offer financial help to members when they are sick or unemployed.

Recognition

Many workplaces have a formal agreement between the union and the company, which states that the union has the right to negotiate with the employer. In these organisations unions are said to be 'recognised' for collective bargaining purposes. Recent legislation has made recognition automatic where membership is over 50 per cent and there are more than 20 employees. The TUC is campaigning for a change to the law so that smaller enterprises are included and recognition is granted where a simple majority want it (of those who vote).

Representation

Unions represent individuals when they have a work problem, and workers now have a legal right to be accompanied by their union in a grievance or disciplinary hearing at work. This usually settles the matter, but if the problem is not resolved it may go to an employment tribunal. A tribunal makes sure employment laws are adhered to. It is made up of people outside the workplace and members can ask their union to represent them there. Most cases at employment tribunals are about pay, unfair dismissal, redundancy or discrimination at work.

Unions also offer members legal representation. This is usually to help people get financial compensation for work-related injuries or to help members take their employer to court as a last resort.