



Unions in the Community:
a survey of union reps

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The opinions expressed within this publication are those of the author rather than the TUC.

Introduction

The key resource that unions possess is, arguably, their thousands upon thousands of lay activists. These 200,000 lay volunteers are a tangible link between national unions and their membership of some seven million members. Lay reps and stewards lie at the heart of union efforts to develop and sustain workplace organization, and there is significant evidence to suggest that where lay reps are present and active, members and potential members are likely to be both more aware of union presence, and to think that the union is effective in their workplace.

But union reps are not only a key *workplace* resource. In the many discussions surrounding the possible strategies which unions should consider deploying in order to regenerate and grow themselves, community unionism and social movement unionism¹ have been regularly suggested. Unions in other parts of the world – notably in Australia and the United States - have often deployed these strategies to good effect. The Justice for Janitors campaign in California is probably the best known example here. Closer to home, the TELCO (The East London Community Organization)/London Citizens example is often cited as an effective example of joint union/community organizing. Traditional models of community unionism have often sought to distinguish between the work of unions within the workplace and the work that unions undertake in the wider community.

However, such an approach risks failing to recognise not only the wealth of activism and experience within unions themselves, but also more critically that union activists are also often active within so-called extra-union social movements and networks. The very desire for social justice, the holding of the necessary social skills embodied in social capital and unions' activists reflecting the diverse nature of civil society in modern day Britain mean that union activists are often an integral part of community and extra-workplace activity, campaigning and interest representation.

As part of its ongoing 'Active Unions, Active Communities' project, the TUC commissioned this survey to identify and understand in a concrete, up-to-date and robust way what sorts of community and campaigning activity union reps undertake outside their own workplaces and their motivations to do so. This report sets out the key findings from that survey which was undertaken in December 2008.

¹ See the work of Amanda Tattersall at <http://www.communityunionism.org/nucleus/> and Jane Wills' *Union Futures: Building networked trade unionism in the UK*, Fabian Ideas pamphlet, No. 602. 2002.

Survey respondents

The respondents were primarily workplace reps or shop stewards (58%), safety reps (43%) and branch officers (36%). Union learning reps also made up a significant proportion of the respondents (19%) – with smaller numbers of the respondents identifying themselves as equality reps (6%), convenors (6%) and environmental reps (3%). Because union reps often hold more than one position and were permitted by the survey to specify all the workplace lay posts they held, these numbers exceed 100%. A fuller picture of the respondents' characteristics is given in the Technical Appendix.

Respondents' workplaces

A number of questions in the survey asked about the characteristics of the workplaces the union reps worked in. These were important in order to understand the context of their activity in terms of the environment they worked in – whether broadly supportive or not – and the resources they may have access to *vis-à-vis* the scale of the task of representation they undertake. A brief overview of the characteristics of respondents' workplaces (see Technical Appendix for further detail) shows that the profile of respondents' workplaces suggests quite a healthy and positive picture for union organization in terms of the membership density, the number of workplaces reps and workplace activity, particularly in the larger workplaces. Setting aside any influence the employer has on the question, it means that union workplace membership and organization provides a supportive foundation for the work of union reps. One interesting finding was that 23% of respondent union reps reported rising membership density in their workplaces and 52% reported stable membership densities, suggesting a relatively healthy picture of workplace organisation.

Campaigning Activities

The main body of the survey asked union reps about the campaigns which they have been active in beyond the workplace. These covered categories which included both union-based and non-union based activities. For example, some activity may have come about as a result of urging from their unions (branches, national union) to be involved in campaigns or as a result of a union initiative to set up a particular campaign. Meanwhile, other activity may have come about from stimuli and sources external to their union where union members participate in these without any urging from their union and as a result of union reps' own particular preferences and choices.

The respondents showed that not only were they involved in a wide array of campaigning external to their own workplaces but also that that they were involved

in, on average, two such campaigns per union rep. Taking this and the number of reps undertaking civic engagement activities (see below), the union reps surveyed are considerably more active in activities than the members of the general populace.

The *Citizenship Survey* for 2007-2008 in England Wales showed that 73% of all adults had volunteered at least once in the last year and 48% of these had volunteered once a month. A further 39% had also engaged in some form of civic participation. Union reps were nearly three times as active in terms of volunteering and more than eight times as active in terms of civic participation. Moreover (see below), they also gave over more of their time to these activities than members of the general populace.

When asked about the types of campaigning they were involved in, the greatest number of union reps were involved such campaigns concerning disability or health issues and those tackling racism and the far right (like the British National Party) and environmental issues (see Table 1). Lesser numbers were involved in a number of campaigns such as women’s issues and anti-war work. Nonetheless, Table 1 makes it clear that union reps were involved in more than just one campaign per rep.

Table 1: Percentages involved in different types of campaigns

Disability or health issues	37%
Tackling racism and the far right	31%
Environmental issues	25%
Women’s issues	13%
Local community campaigns	12%
Other	12%
Anti-war or peace campaigns	11%
'Pride' or other campaigns relating to sexual orientation	11%
Asylum seekers, refugees or undocumented worker issues	7%

(Note: Respondents could choose from as many campaigns as they were involved in.)

In terms of how much time per week union reps spent on these overall campaigning activities, 53% reported they spend more than two hours per week on these (33% spent 2-5 hours, 7% 5-10 hours and 13% more than 10 hours). The remainder (47%) spent less than one hour per week on these activities.

Shop steward or office reps, safety reps, union learning reps, branch officers and convenors indicated that they proportionately were most involved in campaigns tackling racism and the far right, environmental issues, disability or health issues and union campaigns. As might be expected, equality reps were more proportionately involved in sexual orientation and women’s issues campaigns while environmental reps indicated likewise that they were more involved environmental issues.

Across all the unions, reps were proportionately more involved in campaigns tackling racism and the far right, disability or health issues and union campaigns. In terms of the unions where a significant body of union reps responded, those union reps in PCS, Unison and Unite indicated they were also proportionately more involved in campaigns tackling racism and the far right, disability or health issues and union campaigns. There were no significant variations from this pattern in terms of union

reps by sector.

Similarly, by workplace size, number of active reps per workplace, whether the union was recognised or not, the degree of union density and whether density is growing, falling or stable, there were no significant variations from the pattern identified before of the greatest proportionate involvement concerning campaigns tackling racism and the far right, disability or health issues and union campaigns (although environmental issues consistently polled the fourth most important locus of activity).

However, it is also clear from a breakdown of the responses that those unions which are recognised – and may thus have facility time provided – and those workplaces where there are more than two active unions reps allow the union reps there in general to be more active and to be so across a wider range of campaigns. Thus, for example, it was noticeable that the different parts of the public sector and public services comprised the majority of involvement by union reps in these campaigns.

Positions in civil society

Just as union reps hold lay office position with unions, the survey asked the respondents whether they also hold similar lay positions in wider civil society which formalize their involvement and activity as well as possibly giving them a leadership role in these capacities. Eight per cent were school governors, 5% were trustees or members of the governing body of a local organization, 1% were Justices of the Peace or Magistrates while 19% were volunteers in local community organizations like sports or youth clubs. A further 10% were involved in other forms of civil activism.

However, of these roles, a number of union reps played more than one role or took part in more than one activity.

These activities were given over a varying number of hours per week, with the majority (72%) spending less than one hour per week on these activities, but 20% spending between 2-5 hours per week on these and the remainder (8%) giving over more than 5 hours per week here. This is a substantial time commitment over and above their union rep union duties and does not cover other forms of union activity which they may engage in like education schools, holding regional lay positions and attending conferences. The only area in which members of the general populace are more involved than union reps was in being Justices of the Peace or Magistrates.

When union reps which hold such positions in wider civil society were asked which campaigns they are also most involved in, there was again unanimity - tackling racism and the far right, disability or health issues and union campaigns again predominated with environmental issues in follow up position. Of the types of union reps that held these civic positions or were active in voluntary groups, all types were more involved in local community organizations than any other form here, with BECTU, PCS, Unison and Unite most active in these positions and capacities. Here, there was a close correspondence between the union reps from the public sector and public services undertaking most of these types of roles. Where there existed more than five active union reps in a workplace and union densities were high (>50%), there was a noticeable tendency to have more of the reps undertaking these types of additional activities.

Extra-workplace union activity: trades councils

Trades union councils (or more commonly ‘trades council’) are still an important element of the overall union movement. There are currently 129 councils registered with the TUC. Registration has seen a steady growth in recent years with only 102 registered 10 years ago. Over half the current registered trades union councils report that they are active in their communities or are working with local affiliated union branches.

Activity by trades councils includes participation in local *Hope not Hate* events and other anti-fascist activity, support for the *Speak up for Public Services* campaign, support for local health services as well as living wage campaigns, education in the community and union development. However, and despite these positive developments, many reps play little or no active role in their local trades union council, with only 15% of union reps surveyed being active in their local body. A further 9% reported that another union rep in their workplace was delegated to attend the trades council.

Given that only 11% of respondent reps reported that there was no local trades council in their area, the reasons for the low level of involvement are to be found elsewhere. Firstly, 27% reported that they did not know what a trades council is or does. For example, one respondent commented: ‘[I’m n]ot sure how to be involved and what would be needed’ while others said ‘I would be involved if I actually knew who to contact’ and ‘[It’s n]ever mentioned at branch meetings.’

Equally importantly, 38% responded that they did not participate for issues of lack of time due to personal and family commitments. Often when pressed people give the reason or excuse of ‘I haven’t got the time’ for not becoming involved in voluntary activities and this is usually a subterfuge for ‘The issue isn’t important enough for me to bother making the time’. However, in the case of the union reps, this is unlikely to be the case given that they are highly active and their commitments extend to other union and civic activities as some of the quotes below indicate:

As I work an abnormal shift (4 am till 12 noon) my sleep pattern does not allow me late nights (beyond 7pm or 8 pm) so I do what I can in the time I have.

Lack of time: I have to commute 1 ½ hours each way to work and back.

I live 30 miles from my workplace, so commuting is an issue.

I was active in the past but I'm now too busy as Brigade H&S representative.

And only 4% of those respondents who were not active in their trades councils responded this was because they thought a trades council was not relevant to their activities. This indicates there is a latent and so far untapped potential pool of interest and involvement in trades councils.

Of those union reps that were active in their local trades councils, there was a more even spread of involvement across the range of all the aforementioned campaigning activities (tackling racism and so on) whilst for those who were not active in local trades councils there was a much greater conformity to the pattern of proportionate involvement in campaigns concerning tackling racism and the far right, disability or health issues, union campaigns and the environment. There was some crossover of those work were active in their community and in their trades councils – via volunteering in local community projects and activities – but this was limited, reflecting the high degree of existing activity of these union reps.

While it might be expected that more ‘senior reps’ such as branch officers or convenors were more likely to be active in trades councils, given their higher level role in representing members – it was noticeable that shop stewards/office reps and safety reps were more active in this way on a proportional basis. PCS and Unite’s union reps were proportionately more active than any other unions’ union reps in trades councils. This may reflect union policy at a regional/national level. It was not surprising to find that those most active in trades councils came from the large and largest workplaces and those with more than two active union reps in the workplace, union densities in excess of 81% membership and rising and stable memberships.

Religious beliefs and observance

Much of the literature on community unionism has stressed the potential value of unions building relationships and alliances with community-based faith organizations. The surveyed union reps were, therefore, asked about their religious beliefs. Thus, 67% of respondents did not describe themselves ‘religious’, with 6% preferring not to say either way. Of those – 27% – who described themselves as ‘religious’, 64% were Christian, 4% described themselves as Jewish, Hindi and/or Muslim backgrounds and 31% described their religious background as ‘other’. Fourteen per cent of all respondents regularly attended some type of religious service. This is slightly higher than, for example, the estimated one-in-ten of those who identify themselves as Christians and attend church on a weekly basis.

Of those that saw themselves as ‘religious’, 84% responded that they saw a link between their religious faith and their union membership and/or activity. Some responses highlight the importance of seeking fairness, community, respect, justice, tolerance and equality:

As an active trade unionist I am doing good work to help other people to ensure they are treated fairly and justly. As a Christian, I am also trying to help the wider community. I see no conflict in being a Christian and an active trade unionist.

Being a Christian, I believe in fairness and justice for all. Christianity and unions are two sides of the same coin

My faith ... taught me to stand against injustice and speak out for those unable to speak for themselves for whatever reason.

Buddhism promotes compassion, and my union activity is to protect public

services which are needed for society and the most vulnerable in it.

As a Quaker I believe strongly in the equality of all, and in being active in society to challenge issues of injustice and inequality.

In Islam, there are fundamental teachings concerned with human rights including the right to respect as all human beings are deemed worthy of respect ,the right to justice which includes the right to seek justice and the duty to do justice ,the right to freedom and the fact that human beings should be free of all forms of bondage.

Priorities for the union movement

Given that union reps are so important for the present and future health and vitality of the union movement, it is important to not only know their views but to identify what their current policy priorities are and, thus, what motivates them to carry out much of their campaigning activities. When asked to select no more than three options from a menu of eleven of campaigning issues that unions should give much greater attention to, the priorities were given as follows by the reps who undertook the survey:

Table 2: Percentages of union reps choosing issues as top three campaigning priorities

Tackling poverty and inequality	74%
Tackling unemployment	50%
Improving the quality of public services	46%
Tackling racism and the far-right	44%
Education and schooling	35%
Promoting community cohesion	23%
Protecting the environment	22%
The provision of affordable housing	20%
Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour	18%
Improving public transport	18%
Tackling drug and alcohol abuse	10%

This order of prioritisation again reflects the high level of commitment of union reps to social justice, and particularly that for the most disadvantaged groups in society. Reflecting the concerns of the present time, a high level of focus was laid on dealing with unemployment in a time of recession. Although falling down the league table somewhat, ‘tackling racism and the far right’ is arguably equally well tackled by dealing with the social conditions which give rise to it.

The role of unions in the community

When asked to think about the role of unions in local communities, 17% thought unions already played an active and important role in local communities – but 72% of the respondents felt that unions could develop this role further. When asked what more unions could do to play an active role in local communities, the majority of responses concerned suggestions of the need to raise unions' profile and awareness of their role and contribution, particularly amongst the young. Some of the comments also concerned suggesting means of doing this, particularly through participation in community activities or providing weekend surgeries like those of MPs. A selection of comments highlights these suggestions:

Increased participation in local communities - meaningful sponsorship of issues relevant to those in the community, including sporting activities in order to help the general public gain an understanding of what unions are, and what they stand for; and also the power that is available for change embodied in the solidarity of unions.

Supporting membership by seeking volunteers from outside the area to help, with their time. Reciprocating accordingly. Making members aware of initiatives of other members local community projects.

By encouraging their stewards and members to participate more in community affairs such as community councils, school activities, become more involved with helping at youth activities such as youth clubs, scout and guide movements, etc. Take more of an interest and volunteer to help with gala days and any other community activity rather than just dump their kids at those events and let 'someone else' do it for them.

Most young people have no idea of what unions is or what they do. There should be trade union history, background, what they do in the curriculum in schools. In colleges and universities, there should be a module on employment rights and how trade unions can help.

Being actively involved in trades councils, supporting events financially as well as turning up, eg May Day, National Play Day etc. Campaigning on the streets, with United Against Fascism, the NHS 60 celebrations and so on.

Make anything you do public and plaster your union logos everywhere. And ALWAYS have joining forms available - plus TUC info for people interested in unions in other areas.

Unions have a visible presence in local communities. People out there do good work but you never read about it. Unions are very poor when it comes to media exposure, and whilst I can accept the hostile attitude of most national papers, it is not the case at local level where they are often desperate for stories and far more should be done. Unions appear to be stuck in a rigid mindset - there's a need for some more creative thinking and for them to throw their weight behind worthy local initiatives.

Often communities are faced with decisions made by faceless councillors which badly affect them and their communities, almost on every occasion they have little training in representation and public speaking, and are easily discounted by the poor grievance programmes set up by the same council. If experienced Trades Union Reps could be called on to represent these often small communities. I know from my own successful endeavours this often is sufficient to change poor decisions.

Gaining awareness to pre-school leavers at careers evenings or becoming part of the curriculum so that young adults are aware of rights and representation.

Be more visible! Unions may be involved in campaigns/community activities locally - and I know some individual union members who are active - but this always seems to be on an individual basis rather than representing the union.

My own union branch is often reluctant to back local campaigns because they think some members might not agree with the way we allocate resources.

Depends on activists interests, but need to demonstrate to local communities that trade unionism is about wider issues. Public transport affects workers as well as others, need to have a more holistic approach, and consider public services that should serve communities in the widest context. Lots of potential links with privatisation and profit driven injustice, and degradation of the environment

More outreach work utilising the skills of learning and safety reps to improve the awareness, knowledge and skills of the community as a whole, both in work related and social community issues. For instance, union safety reps could help community groups with risk assessments, learning reps could source courses for community members in local halls/schools. The unions can be seen as a social benefit, contributing to quality of life as a whole, not just in the workplace.

When asked about their views on which issues unions should play a greater, lesser or the same level of activity in the community, the issues which most reps who thought unions should be more active on were tackling racism and the far right, disability and health issues, the environment and union campaigns.

Conclusions

It is clear that union reps are heavily involved in campaigning and activity whose focus is not solely or even mainly their own workplace. Indeed, they are heavily engaged in a large number of aspects of community interaction and exchange, reflecting that they are of some standing and involvement in their communities. They display a high level of practical commitment to these activities. Therefore, union reps 'add value' to their communities they are involved in. This testifies to their aspirational agenda of social justice, fairness, tolerance and respect and their commitment to engage in collective activities that work towards those ends. No doubt their experiences as union reps and as community activists cross-fertilize with each so that they form a desirable set of inter-personal skills commonly known as social capital.

Several specific points emerge out of the survey's findings:

- By comparison to the general populace, considerable amounts of time and effort are expended by union reps in extra-workplace campaigns
- Union reps possess high levels of different types of social capital
- Given the concentration of much work on relatively few shoulders amongst union reps, the downside to the accumulation of considerable amounts of social capital in comparatively few hands may be potential activist burn out
- Whilst communities contain much in the way of social capital and networks which are outside the orbit of unions, unions' own activists are not only a bridge to that capital and those networks but they are also part of that capital and those networks
- The prioritization of environmental concerns is already underway in union activists' work
- Union reps take the campaigns organized by own unions seriously and work in these campaigns suggesting that they respect the choice of campaigns their unions organize and show support and loyalty to these
- A virtuous circle exists of union reps work in workplace of high union density and good union organization, whereby this supportive environment facilitates greater representation and activity and this, in turn, supports or reinforced membership density and organization
- Union activists believe that unions are underselling themselves in terms of their community engagement and profile

In light of this survey the TUC and its affiliated member unions should consider:

- Support for developing different approaches to 'community unionism'. Community unionism in Britain may look very different to approaches developed in, for example the US, where activists are more likely to be involved in faith-based organisations and communities – the TUC's 'Active Unions, Active Communities' project should support innovative approaches to community unionism
- Lobbying for recognition by government, state and other civil society organizations of the valuable role played by union reps in their local communities, and developing proposals for building upon and extending this role (particularly through the attribution of resources)

- The challenge for unions is to deploy these links and capital through creating campaigns which benefit both unions and the organizations that their union reps are active in or which encourage their union reps to think with their 'union hats' on when they are active in the extra-union activities
- Better informing lay activist and reps about the role of local Trades Union Councils, and encouraging Trades Councils to develop strategies to engage unions at a local level

Technical Appendix

Survey population characteristics

In early December 2008, the survey team e-mailed registered members of the TUC's unionreps network inviting them to participate by completing an on-line questionnaire². The composition of the respondents was a fairly robustly representative sample of union reps (see below). The total number of union rep respondents was 405 spread throughout the 58 TUC-affiliated unions with a combined membership of 6.5m. As might be expected the largest unions (with the most reps) provided the lion's share of the respondents – with 22% of the respondents being from UNITE and 20% from UNISON. Fifteen per cent of the respondents came from PCS while BECTU, CWU, FBU, GMB, POA, Prospect, RMT, SCP, TSSA, UCATT, URTU and USDAW each provided between 1% and 10% of responses. Those unions with representation of less than 1% included Accord, Aslef, ATL, BDA, Community, Connect, CPHVA, CSP, EIS, FDA, NASUWT, NGSU, NUDAGO, NUT, SoR and UTW.

The sectoral distribution of respondents, in part, reflected those of the unions they were reps for. However, given that some of the major unions are now general unions which organize in a multiplicity of different sectors and that some sectors are still organized by a number of unions, there is not as tight a fit in this regard as might be expected.

Those sectors which were particularly well represented included local and national government (18%), the civil service and other public services (15%), education (9%) and health (8%). Reasonably well represented were entertainment (7%), manufacturing using metals (7%), transport (7%), agriculture and forestry (5%) and other (5%). The following sectors - banking, finance and insurance, distribution and wholesale, oil and gas, post and telecoms, retail and shops, and voluntary and membership organizations – were all represented at between 1%-2% levels while chemicals, mining and quarrying and fuel, drinks and tobacco, electricity, water and sewage, food production, information technology, paper, cardboard and packaging, science and research, textiles, clothing and leather, and wood and furniture were all represented at less than 1%.

While reflecting to some degree the dominant contours of the location of where the union movement is present, the spread of respondents does give a reasonably good grasp of the picture across the wider economy. Therefore, in the heartlands of union membership and organization in the public sector, there is good representation of respondents and an array of representation in the private service sector is also found.

² Just under 14,000 reps are registered to receive e-mail alerts from the TUC's unionreps web-site: www.unionreps.org.uk

Respondents' workplaces

Twenty per cent of union reps worked in workplaces with less than 50 workers while 10% worked in workplaces with between 51 and 100 workers. Meantime, 30% worked in workplaces with between 101 and 500 workers and 10% in workplaces with another 10% working in workplaces with 501 to 1,000 workers. Somewhat surprisingly, the remainder – 30% - worked in very large workplaces, that is, with more than 1,001 workers.

When it came to how many union reps, including the respondent, were active in their workplace, 18% were the only active union rep (– a much lower figure than the 45% of the latest 2004 *Workplace Employment Relations Survey*).³ Yet, 35% worked alongside between two and five other reps and 47% were alongside more than five other reps, giving an encouraging picture. Of the workplaces that union reps were active in, 92% worked in workplaces where the union they represented was recognised for representation and collective bargaining by the employer.

In terms of their own specific union density – the percentage of the total number of workers in the relevant workforce that their union represents – only 17% represented less than 40% of the relevant workforces. Forty per cent is an important threshold in terms of worker support for gaining union recognition through the statutory process. Only another 8% of workplaces experienced a density of less 50% for their relevant workforces. However, it is also important to recognise that in workplaces where more than one union is recognised and/or is organized, the overall or combined union density would be higher.

That said, the remainder of union reps worked in workplaces where the majority were union members. Thirteen per cent had between 51%-60% density, 11 per cent had 61%-70% density and another 11 per cent had 71%-80% density. Standing out were those workplaces – 13%- which had densities of between 81% and 90% and where 17% had densities of upwards of 91%. Equally revealing was that 23% of union reps reported rising membership density in their workplaces and 52% reported stable membership densities. The remainder (25%) reported declining densities.

³ See Kersley, B. Alpin, C. Forth, J. Bryson, A. Bewley, H. Dix, G. and Oxenbridge, S. (2006) *Inside the Workplace: findings from the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey*, London: Routledge, p124.

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