It is not uncommon for trade unions to get a bad press.

Some within government and the media are keen to paint us as constantly being at odds with employers and the public.

The truth of the matter, however, is that we work very closely with companies, businesses and public sector employers throughout the country to improve working conditions and to boost staff productivity.

It is a little known fact but each year more than 200,000 people are given training and learning opportunities through their union.

Take the example of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), who recently signed a learning agreement with Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service. This will ensure that dedicated staff, who provide a vital service we all on rely on, can improve their skills in areas such as English, maths and IT.

You won’t hear much about this kind of work in the media, but it highlights the positive role unions play in the workplace.

Another example is the partnership work done by unions in the North East to improve workplace health and well-being.

The Northern TUC has co-ordinated the *Better Health at Work Award* since 2013. In the past year alone it has helped over 190,000 workers, with employees in almost 300 workplaces from every sector participating in activities ranging from healthy eating and alcohol awareness to Mental Health First Aid.

These are not the kind of stories that get much attention, but they demonstrate the difference unions make to people’s lives.

I wish more politicians would visit these kind of projects before pledging their support for the Trade Union Bill, which we believe is a deliberate attempt to shackle unions.

You don't have to belong to a union to be affected by the government’s plans. The pay deals unions agree often set the going rate for workers in many industries. And the health and safety precautions they negotiate help keep millions of us safe at work every year – union members and non-union members alike.

But to get a good deal for workers you need power on both sides of the table.

The government’s proposals are about loading the dice in employers’ favour and penalising those who try and defend their rights.

The power to bargain collectively as a whole workforce over issues like pay has never been more important. Research published over Christmas revealed that richest 10 per cent now own nearly half of the UK’s wealth.

Eight years on from the financial crash people in North East are still earning £1,000 a year less, on average, than before the crisis.

The economy is paying people too little for their hard work, and too much just for sitting on wealth. It is making Britain more and more unequal, with those who are already rich moving even further ahead of the typical family.

This is why we need stronger unions to help people get a fairer share of the cake.

We need a recovery based on higher wages in both the public and private sectors, and investment in skills and industry. So that’s why we’re asking people to get together a group of their workmates and colleagues and all join a union. Because negotiating together for higher wages, investment in skills and better relations at work is how we get an economy that delivers for everyone.

Beth Farhat

Northern TUC Regional Secretary