

# **From resilience to resistance**

**Organising and campaigning for better  
mental health and wellbeing at work**

## What is this briefing about?

The TUC Young Workers Forum is the voice of young trade union members at the TUC. Ensuring employers are doing more to promote good mental health and wellbeing at work is a priority for young members. We want to build a society that is secure, fair and just for all. This briefing:

- looks at the key drivers of poor mental health at work
- outlines young workers' demands for change, which unions can adopt
- provides information and resources to help campaign and organise for better mental health and wellbeing at work and within the trade union movement

## Why is mental health and wellbeing a trade union issue?

One in four people will experience a mental health issue at some point in their life. This could range from day-to-day worries that everyone experiences, to periods of significant stress and anxiety, to longer-term serious conditions.

We spend a significant amount of our adult life at work. Supporting good mental health and wellbeing at work is increasingly being recognised as important by employers, but too many still do not consider it a priority.

We have seen huge improvements to health, safety and wellbeing law at work thanks to campaigning by trade unions. But this progress does not always manifest in the workplace. Unions must centre the promotion of good mental health and wellbeing in all the work we do.

The TUC Young Workers Forum has identified three structural drivers of poor mental health:

### ***The labour market***

The UK's labour market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is increasingly precarious for many, with the longest pay squeeze since Victorian times, a rise in the number of working households in poverty, the underfunding of our public services and a wholly inadequate and punitive welfare state. Evidence increasingly demonstrates the links between feelings of insecurity and poor mental health outcomes.

Young workers are overrepresented in low-paying jobs and insecure work such as zero-hours contracts, agency and casual work. With these circumstances comes one-sided

employer flexibility and a lack of control over time, making it difficult to plan life outside work.

Insecure work means missing out on some core workplace rights, and low pay means not being eligible for statutory sick pay, meaning we can't take time off work to lessen our stress and worries. On top of this, too many young workers are treated unfairly by management, including bullying, and harassment and abuse from colleague and members of the public is an often a daily occurrence.

### ***The workplace and working conditions***

Employers often have a low understanding of - and indifference to - mental health as a workplace issue, with little support to promote good wellbeing at work. This can include common workplace cultures of overwork, presenteeism and a lack of flexibility around working times, leading to stress.

Work-related stress is the second-biggest occupational health problem in England and Wales. Stress is not a mental health diagnosis and is not a recognised mental health condition. People with work-related stress will often experience anxiety, depression or what is termed 'generalised anxiety disorder'.

Risk assessments do not always adequately capture the drivers that can lead to poor mental health – such as stress - at work. Managers and supervisors – often the ones supporting staff with a mental health problem – do not have the time, awareness or training to adequately support staff, with less than one third of managers reporting they are confident with discussing it with staff.<sup>1</sup> This includes workers with long-term mental health conditions, meaning too many disabled workers are pushed out of the labour market due to discrimination, barriers to accessing support and a lack of support to remain in work.

### ***Public sector austerity and an inadequate welfare state***

Mental health services, like many areas of the public sector, have experienced an unprecedented funding squeeze, leaving services understaffed and overstretched. Four-fifths of finance directors of NHS Trusts say financial pressures have led to people waiting longer to get help from mental health services in the past two years alone.<sup>2</sup> This has meant fewer people being able to access the critical help and services when they need them. The current funding commitments for NHS mental health services are insufficient to meet demand.

And it's not just the NHS - a lack of government funding on our core public services has meant local authorities and schools are struggling to support young people with poor mental health. Our safety net has been dramatically undermined after years of underinvestment. In 1984, when unemployment was over 11 per cent, the standard weekly benefits payment was worth a quarter of the average wage. In 1979, it was worth 30 per cent of the average wage. Today the basic rate of universal credit is worth around a sixth of average weekly pay (17 per cent).

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<sup>1</sup> CIPD, 2020. Health and well-being at work.

<sup>2</sup> King's Fund, 2018. How is the NHS performing? December 2018 quarterly monitoring report.

## **Mental health and the Social Model of Disability**

The TUC has adopted the social model of disability. It focuses on the ways that society is organised, and the social and institutional barriers that restrict disabled people's opportunities. The social model sees the person first, and argues that the barriers people face, in combination with their impairments, are what disables them.

Barriers can make it impossible or very difficult to access jobs, buildings or services, but the biggest barrier of all is the problem of attitudes to disability. Removing barriers is the best way to better include millions of disabled people in our society. It places the onus on the employer to make changes to the workplace to make it accessible to disabled people.

We encourage unions to adopt the social model of disability, both when negotiating policies with employers and across the trade union movement and when considering mental health conditions.

## **Challenging the narrative**

As trade unionists, we believe in collectivism: an injury to one is an injury to all. While mental health can impact on everyone in different ways, it can affect us all. The workplace improvements we negotiate to support workers are in everyone's interest.

The current conversation around mental health is to 'fix' it, or for workers to become more 'resilient' by adapting their individual routines to provide coping mechanisms for stress or experiences of mental ill health. Employers are increasingly supporting this 'resilience industry', signing up to awareness days and wellbeing initiatives, which often encourage workers to divulge mental health issues to potentially hostile employers. This risk opening workers employees up to discrimination.

Many union reps will be familiar with wellbeing initiatives that promote mindfulness, exercise and healthy eating. Initiatives that promote positive lifestyle changes to support wellbeing at work are not inherently harmful. But they alone do very little to tackle the causes of poor mental health at work, and should never be considered a one off 'cure'. Nor do they encourage employers to invest in the time, effort and resources to ensure fair workplace policies and proper support for staff through tackling chronic workplace stress.

In the workplace, mental health and wellbeing is a collective concern – and just like pay and pensions, they are concerns we can organise around. Trade unions must be involved from the outset when making changes in the workplace and resist any employer move to individualise workers wellbeing, or label individual workers a 'problem'.

# Our demands for change

The government and employers must take action to support better mental health and wellbeing at work.

The TUC Young Workers Forum asks trade unions to support and adopt these demands.

## **An end to insecurity at work**

- Ban the regular use of zero-hour contracts
- Introduce premium pay for non-contracted hours and full compensation for shifts cancelled at late notice
- Employment rights from day one of the job

## **Fair pay for all young workers**

- Raise the National Living Wage to £10 an hour as quickly as possible
- Include 21-24-year olds in the full adult rate
- Increase the minimum wage for apprentices

## **More control over our work**

- Introduce a right to flexible working from day one of a job
- Ensure staff are consulted on any introduction of new technologies at work, and that the technology is not used for tracking workers' productivity or for performance management
- Agree key terms and conditions at work through collective bargaining with unions

## **Zero-tolerance to bullying, harassment and abuse**

- Support calls to change laws to preventing harassment, including from third parties
- Adequate policies that include a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of abuse and reporting mechanisms that support workers to come forward
- Roll-out comprehensive training for all managers and supervisors to ensure proper support for staff

## **Employers must take mental health and wellbeing seriously**

- Embed good mental health and wellbeing policies and procedures across all areas of work – one-off awareness days are not enough
- Adequate resource and support for managers and supervisors to help staff experiencing mental ill health at work, such as time off to access training

- Ensure adequate policies to identify individuals at risk of suicide

### **Prevent stress at work**

- Recognise work-related stress as a cause of poor mental health and ensure risk assessments policies address risk factors that impact specific groups, including young workers
- Ensure workloads and targets are reasonable
- Tackle overwork culture and presenteeism

### **Fair treatment when we're sick**

- Scrap the minimum earnings threshold for statutory sick pay (SSP) and increase the rate
- Give at least statutory sick pay to all workers, whatever their contract type
- Ensure an adequate sickness policy in every workplace, including pay and leave

### **An end to disability and mental health discrimination**

- Introduce mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting
- Ensure employers support workers' reasonable adjustments, such as using the TUC's disability reasonable adjustments passport
- Count absences for reasons associated with a disability separate from sickness absence

### **Fund our public services properly**

- Fund the NHS properly – 5 per cent extra per year to meet current and future demand, and ensure parity of esteem between mental health services and other NHS services
- Invest in schools, local government and the public services that have borne the brunt of austerity
- Overhaul the punitive benefits system, ensuring everyone is properly supported with a more generous and supportive system including a higher replacement rate

### **Respect our voice at work**

- Ensure more workers know their rights. Employers should provide a written contract of our terms and conditions on day one of the job
- Give unions access to workplaces, so that they can let young workers know about the benefits of joining a union
- Repeal the Trade Union Act in full

# What can unions do now?

## ***Support for workplace reps***

- Download our [mental health and the workplace](#) TUC Education booklet
- Undertake [our eNote on mental health](#) and [watch our webinar](#)
- Introduce [reasonable adjustments disability passports](#) in your workplace
- Complete our [Social Model micro online learning module](#)
- Use the TUC and HSE's guidance [on tackling workplace stress](#)
- Read our [reps guide on suicide prevention](#) at work

## ***Help us win for more workers***

- Sign the petition to [win #SickPayForAll](#)
- Call for [proper support for working parents](#)
- Support us to [ban zero-hour contracts](#)
- Help [stamp out sexual harassment at work](#)
- Demand a [£10 an hour National Living Wage](#)

## ***TUC research***

### **Mental health and disabled workers**

[Disability employment and pay gaps \(2019\)](#)

[Mental health and employment \(2017\)](#)

### **Young workers**

[A new plan for jobs: why we need a new jobs guarantee \(2020\)](#)

[Stuck at the start: young workers' experiences of pay and progression \(2018\)](#)

[Not part of the job: young workers' experiences of third-party harassment and abuse \(2018\)](#)

["I feel like I can't change anything": Britain's young core workers speak out about work \(2017\)](#)

### **Public services**

[Breaking point: the crisis in mental health funding \(2018\)](#)