

GO GREEN AT WORK: THE UNION EFFECT

Growing awareness of the impacts of climate change on our daily lives has spurred union reps and members to find ways to ‘green’ their workplace. Workplaces and work-related travel burn energy, use up resources and create waste, so they are a great way to start. Union environmental reps (green reps) have worked with members and managements on a wide range of green workplace initiatives. Here, we outline the main issues at stake and how unions are getting involved.

Climate change and workplace action

Climate change is happening. The scientific evidence for the warming of our climate system is indisputable. Global warming is an existential threat to the planet, with the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere as a result of our continued consumption of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – pushing up global temperatures.

A motion passed at TUC Congress 2019 stated: “The Earth’s temperature has already risen by one degree above pre-industrial levels. The autumn (2019 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) IPCC report warned that we only have 12 years to keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees.” The TUC campaigns alongside the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC – see www.ituc-csi.org) for a fair, ambitious and binding UN climate change treaty with a ‘just transition’ at its heart.

This motion was the latest of a series of calls at TUC Congress to recognise the immense threat climate change poses to working lives and the UK economy.

Congress has supported calls for massive investment in all forms of low-carbon or carbon-free energy including renewables, new nuclear, and coal and gas power supported by carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology. An active, government-led industrial strategy is essential to drive investment in the green economy and create economic growth and skilled employment for the long term.

There is a clear consensus among economists that failing to act now on climate change will mean far more costly actions later. Now is the time to invest in green energy, low-carbon

technologies, energy efficiency at home and at work and new skills, and to get going on green workplace projects.

The five years to 2019 were the hottest on record, and the period from 2010 to 2019 was the hottest decade since records began. CO₂ concentrations are now the highest they have been for at least 800,000 years based on data from the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S). <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-hottest-year-eu.html>. It is critical that the UK moves towards a low-carbon economy – and fast. Half of UK carbon emissions are produced by work activity – in our energy-intensive industries, power stations and manufacturing plant. But all workplaces have a ‘carbon footprint’. So they are an excellent place to start tackling climate change.

Organisations are far better placed than individuals to install cost-effective green measures and agree collective ways to change our behaviour at work – such as through recycling schemes.

To ensure that the transition to a low-carbon economy is socially just, union reps have a key role to play in securing consultation and the active participation of their members in climate change initiatives at work. This is why trade unions and the TUC have prioritised ‘greening the workplace’ activities.

Cutting carbon, not jobs

We have just lived through a decade of austerity, and the current coronavirus pandemic will usher in more economic hardship. Unions are under pressure to focus on priorities like saving jobs and cutting costs. But with many employers facing

tight budgets in the coming years, union action to green the workplace can help ensure that financial savings from resource and energy efficiency ease the pressure on other costs and helps to protect jobs. The need to strengthen the link between sustainable workplaces and sustainable jobs has never been more urgent.

Women and climate change

Globally, climate change disproportionately affects women. UN figures show that 80 per cent of those displaced by climate change are women. Women are also more likely to rely on public transport and are less likely to have been given opportunities to acquire the skills needed for a green transition.

At the 2020 TUC Women's Conference held at Congress House in March, the TUC Women's Committee released a statement addressing the issue, which included the following words:

"Women and our unions must be at the heart of measures to address the climate crisis.

"A transition to a green, net-zero carbon future can only be fair and just if it addresses the unequal impact of climate change. We need investment in vital services like greener public transport, in skills and in supporting transition for affected industries. New green jobs must be good jobs. We must recognise the impact on women across the world and, in particular, on those in the global south. And we need a voice in how we mitigate the impact of climate change, too. Our fire services and local authorities have faced huge cuts over the past ten years, but they are on the frontline supporting communities hit by extreme weather."

The UN Climate Change Learning Partnership has produced a free online course called Gender and Environment that explores the issues. See unccllearn.org/open-online-course-gender-and-environment.

The union environmental or 'green' rep

Just as unions and employers work together to improve health and safety in the workplace through safety committees, union environmental (or 'green') reps can be elected to champion environmental issues. They can raise awareness and ensure that green issues are included in the negotiating or bargaining agenda at work.

The main concern of a union green rep is to agree a joint approach to 'greening the workplace'. The starting point, as always, is talking to union members about their ideas to change the way they work and the resources used.

The rights of green reps

In workplaces across the UK, unions have been extending consultation to cover a widening environmental agenda. Technically, there is no legal right for a union to elect a specifically green rep with the same facility time and support that other reps have. But through discussion with employers, union reps are reaching agreements to extend the scope of union activities to cover environmental issues such as energy use, recycling and green travel plans. This new area of work can be covered by shop stewards, health and safety reps or formally recognised union green reps - some of whom may be new to union activities.

In other words, the law is lagging behind best practice. Of course, we know that facility time for union reps has been under attack, especially in the public sector. Despite this, the TUC and its affiliated unions are campaigning for better rights for union green reps to help them influence the environmental agenda at work, just as for health and safety reps.

The TUC would like to see legal rights to paid time off to carry out these functions and to attend training. But even without these new rights, many trade unionists have decided to just get on with the job and have negotiated new rights to be involved in environmental issues, for employers to formally recognise the role of union green reps and for voluntary agreements on facilities and facility time.

Reps have also negotiated the creation of new joint environmental committees. In most workplaces the bargaining agenda is decided through negotiation, not by law, so there is no reason why environmental issues such as energy saving or green travel plans should not be formally included in the bargaining agenda.

Fighting for a 'just transition'

Climate change is affecting our quality of life whether we live in developed or developing nations. As trade unionists, we must speak out for workers everywhere in the fight for social and environmental justice.

The TUC and its affiliates are calling for a just transition to a low-carbon economy. In July 2019, the TUC published a statement called *A Just Transition to a Greener, Fairer Economy*. This set out in detail what we are asking for. The statement called for:

- › investment in the new economy, to develop the energy, manufacturing and transport networks needed for a green economy: we called for a cross-party commission, made up of unions, workers, employers and consumers to drive progress
- › a voice for workers at the bargaining table - this is crucial: there are no climate deniers in the trade union movement, but workers are much more enthusiastic about the drive to a 'net-zero' carbon economy if it is something done in partnership with them than if it is implemented by politicians and managers above their heads, with unions having no say in the process
- › investment in the skills needed so that workers in today's fossil fuel sectors will be in a position to take on new roles in greener companies in the future
- › new jobs to be good jobs: however sceptical some may be about jobs in sectors like oil and gas, those jobs are often on terms negotiated by trade union officials, so they are well-paid and highly skilled - jobs in new sectors of the economy need to live up to this high standard.
- › Changes in working procedures need to be assessed for their environmental impact. By working closely with branch reps and members, green reps can identify any concerns that are at odds with other employee interests and ensure change is fairly negotiated.
- › Cost savings can be fed into staff bonus schemes or ring-fenced for investment in environmental improvements.
- › Recruitment spin-offs can result from union involvement in the environmental agenda, bringing new members and reps into the union.
- › Young people are particularly concerned about climate change. Campaigning on this issue, as well as being important in its own right, helps us to demonstrate that trade unions will take on the concerns of the next generation.
- › Environmental improvements can maximise natural daylight, improve heating and ventilation controls and improve air quality, making workplaces healthier, safer, less stressful and more comfortable places in which to work.
- › Involving staff in environmental decisions can improve engagement. Many employers have their own 'environmental champion' schemes, but workers are often unaware of them, or see it as just another level of management. Union environmental reps, by comparison, are answerable to union members, and happily work with green champions to help make the workplace more sustainable.
- › Encouraging employers to focus on green issues can lead to the creation of new green jobs and skills.

The TUC statement is here:

www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-08/A_Just_Transition_To_A_Greener_Fairer_Economy_0.pdf

Unions

There are many benefits to unions and workers if environmental issues are included in the collective bargaining agenda.

You can use the following arguments in favour of unions pursuing a just transition:

- › The bottom line is that making workplaces sustainable saves money and protects jobs. Energy inefficiency in businesses and organisations means that extra costs are passed on to consumers and service users. Trade union members are being hit with a double whammy.
- › Working practices may need to be adapted to cope with more frequent experience of higher temperatures. Dress codes, uniforms and equipment all need to be suitable for workplace conditions under a changing climate, and shift patterns and breaks may need to be reconsidered by employers and renegotiated.
- › Extending the union consultation agenda helps reps anticipate future changes and priorities, increasing awareness of external pressures on an organisation, for instance any non-compliance with environmental regulations, or financial penalties and fines it may face.

Employers

Businesses also face numerous pressures and incentives to go green. These include:

- › economic competitiveness and reducing overheads: with energy prices being unpredictable, cutting expenditure is a priority: sound environmental management lowers energy bills, landfill costs, water bills, transport costs and the costs of consumables, hardware and repairs
- › reducing insurance premiums: in some sectors, such as the chemical and pharmaceutical industries, environmental audits are needed before insurance companies will provide cover: with extreme weather events now the 'norm', companies face a loss of business and increased insurance premiums
- › attracting customers and green investment: customers, businesses in supply chains and governments all prefer companies with a clean and green record.

Climate laws and targets

There is also a growing body of legislation relating to climate change. This includes:

- › The Climate Change Act 2008: this established a target for the UK to reduce its emissions by at least 80 per cent from 1990 levels by 2050. This target represents an appropriate UK contribution to global emission reductions consistent with limiting global temperature rise to below 2°C. The short-term target was a binding 34 per cent cut in carbon emissions by 2020.
- › Carbon Budgets: to ensure that regular progress is made towards this long-term target, the 2008 Act also established a system of five-yearly carbon budgets, currently stretching out to 2023–2027, to serve as stepping-stones on the way.
- › UK CO₂ emissions: in 2017 the UK emitted 367 million tonnes of CO₂. The government has committed to reaching a 'net-zero' carbon economy by 2050. To do this, it will need a "whole economy approach". All sectors should be thinking about how they can reduce emissions.
- › Committee on Climate Change (the CCC): this is an independent, statutory body established under the Climate Change Act 2008. Its purpose is to advise the UK government and devolved administrations on emissions targets and report to parliament on progress made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preparing for climate change. Its key strategic priorities are to give genuinely independent advice to government on setting and meeting carbon budgets and preparing for climate change; and monitor progress in reducing emissions and achieving carbon budgets (see www.theccc.org.uk).
- › UK energy market: industry and energy companies are covered by energy market legislation designed to incentivise energy efficiency, tax energy use and encourage investment in low-carbon energy. Details of the various taxes, levies and exemptions can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/green-taxes-and-reliefs/capital-allowances-on-energyefficient-items>

- › Climate change and Brexit: environmental laws, as well as environmental taxes, may change now that the UK has left the European Union. The TUC wishes to see a level playing field between UK and EU environmental regulations. We also wish to ensure high environmental standards included in any trade deals signed between the UK and other sovereign nations. Employers and unions should keep an eye on the precise environmental rules that emerge after the transition period is over and the UK is no longer covered by EU legislation.

Making the case for trade union involvement

Most businesses could easily save between 10 and 20 per cent of their energy costs through simple low cost or even cost-free measures. But, to do this, workers on the shop floor should be involved. Staff will not be able to deliver changes if they don't understand and support the reasons why they are being introduced.

Points to consider are:

- › Union environmental reps can play a key role in securing workplace consultation and the active participation of union members in environmental initiatives at work. Union communication networks and consultative arrangements can offer ready-made links with employees on the ground that employers find hard to reach.
- › Unions have the confidence of their members, so union involvement in environmental projects will reassure employees that their interests are being taken into account and that the latest green campaign isn't just 'greenwash' - that is, only pretending to be genuinely concerned about the environment.
- › Setting up joint management and union environmental committees and negotiating framework agreements with employers can embed workforce engagement on carbon reduction and environmental sustainability into the way organisations work. Obtaining senior management buy-in is crucial to making a difference.
- › If an organisation manages its environmental performance via an environmental management system (EMS), union involvement will strengthen the EMS and can form an important part of the evidence employers use to gain accreditation.



UNIONS IN ACTION

BFAWU work with Greggs to go green

Taken from the TUC's guide for green reps, *Cutting Carbon, Growing Skills* (see below)

The Bakers Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU) has been working with high street baker Greggs to train staff and raise environmental awareness.

Sarah Woolley, the BFAWU general secretary, has been leading the union's work to 'green' workplaces where they have members.

Sarah explained why the union is getting involved with the green skills agenda: "After moving the climate change motion at TUC Congress in 2017 we approached a number of employers about our plans to initially extend the health and safety reps role to incorporate an environmental aspect - with a view to work towards green reps in the future when we had a training programme in place."

"Greggs bit our hands off. We explained that our health and safety reps would initially become SHE reps (safety, health and environment) and they jumped at the chance to work with us to make that happen."

Greggs were very keen to work with the union on this agenda and offered to produce some training that was relevant to the company as well as being acceptable to the union.

Sarah said: "We really are pushing at an open door. Greggs have had a SHE department for years and really were waiting for us to catch up - it's usually the other way around. It's refreshing to have an employer engage so much and it not be a fight!"

Sessions were trialled with reps before rolling out the training. The first training session looked at

carbon footprints, with further ones covering waste management and energy use.

Sarah feels this is just a start and said: "It would be fantastic if other employers would engage in this way. We now have a template of how the sessions can be run; they would just need tweaking to make relevant to specific employers."

"The format Greggs has used is great. They have included us in the discussions, and to a point the development, though they have taken the lead with that. They have made the sessions short, informative and engaging. There really is no reason why other employers can't work with us to do the same - many are doing some great things around the environment!"

Beyond the work with Greggs, BFAWU has been collating green surveys that were completed at their annual conference and various regional meetings. Sarah said this has shown there is an interest from reps/members for the union to develop a role for green reps.

In the meantime, the union is producing a quarterly Green Future newsletter which is full of best practice, ideas that can be done at home or at work, interesting articles and links to more information and online resources.

Back at Greggs, the reps who have attended the sessions have given very positive feedback, mainly about being more aware of their own behaviour and how they can make a difference in their shops or at home.

Unions are best placed to:

- › monitor the effectiveness of environmental policies and provide staff input
- › gain staff support for changes to workplace practices
- › use existing union structures and procedures to influence and develop members' thinking and actions
- › raise staff awareness and encourage behavioural change
- › improve operational procedures.

First steps in greening the workplace

A good place to start is the TUC's guide for green reps, *Cutting Carbon, Growing Skills*

www.unionlearn.org.uk/publications/cutting-carbon-growing-skills-green-skills-just-transition

Other actions and points to consider:

- › Check your union website: is there an environment page? If yes, check for resources.
- › Has your union got a policy on green reps? If yes, have any attempts been made to get recognition at a local or national level?
- › Get in touch with your union - some provide their own environmental training for reps.
- › Map your union organisation and potential activists.
- › Consider organising a green event in your workplace. Talk to the union learning rep and take up opportunities to link events with training initiatives like continuous professional development (CPD) programmes.

- › Run an environmental survey to get staff opinions and identify staff concerns on environmental issues. This will highlight ideas and solutions, give staff ownership of the project and raise the profile of the union's environmental work.

Climate and Employment Proof our Work (CEPOW)

Every year, the ITUC organises Climate and Employment Proof our Work (CEPOW) day. The idea of CEPOW is to promote a conversation between unions and employers in the workplace about the organisation's climate footprint. In 2019, ITUC Learning Services designed a short, on-line quiz made up of questions about lower carbon practices in general and that could be applied to individual companies in particular. For more information about CEPOW, see here:

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/cepow>

Appointing a green rep

Finding people to take on the role of a green rep needs planning and publicity, but where individuals have expressed an interest there should be a discussion around what they are willing and able to do and arrangements made for training and facilities. Initially, the person may want only to be a point of contact for the union on environmental issues. This may involve distributing leaflets and reporting any concerns. Over time, and as new reps gain confidence, this role can be expanded. Recruiting new reps to take on the green rep role will avoid overburdening existing union reps.

Negotiating on a green agenda

If your employer has no local or national agreement on union environmental reps (check with your union), you'll need to convince them that green reps have a role to play. Consider:

- › checking for any existing environmental policies in your organisation
- › finding out if existing policies make reference to staff engagement or involvement
- › identifying a range of points that could be put to management to illustrate why involving the union is the best way to achieve better environmental standards, highlighting how unions can help the employer to manage risks

- › using examples of where union involvement has improved environmental and business performance – if you can't find anything for your industry or company, take a look at the case studies in *Cutting Carbon, Growing Skills* and contact your own union for examples of best practice.

Establishing a green committee

You may decide you would prefer to set up a 'green forum' to meet management. This may be a sub-committee of an existing structure like a health, safety and environment committee, or a separate arrangement. Either way you will need to consider:

- › Membership: the management side should be represented by a senior manager and include roles like facilities, purchasing and any staff with a specific environmental management role. The staff side should consist of union reps from recognised unions. Additional involvement may be needed on an ad hoc basis, for example, the HR department or specific staff who deal with particular aspects of policy and implementation.
- › Conduct: establishing procedures on how the committee will function. For example, frequency of meetings, who will chair the committee and its relationship to other bodies.
- › Terms of reference: this should outline the range of issues to be discussed.

Negotiating a joint environment or climate change agreement or policy

Some unions will be able to negotiate a climate change agreement. Any agreement or policy should cover the main issues, such as waste management, but make sure it also cross references any other more detailed policies which exist that may include specific targets and action points. For further advice on climate change, contact your union or check out your union's website.

More information

The TUC's energy and climate change webpage features reports and posts on green issues. See www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/industrial-strategy/energy-and-climate-change

TUC (2007)

Go Green at Work

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/gogreenatwork.pdf>

The original textbook for green reps to tackling workplace challenges

TUC (2019)

A just transition to a greener, fairer economy

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/just-transition-greener-fairer-economy>

TUC Education runs courses on trade unions and the environment. Search for classroom and online courses on the TUC Education website.

See www.tuc.org.uk/training

Many trade unions have set up green workplace projects, provide environmental information on their websites, have set up internal green reps networks, and provide their own training courses and materials on the environment and climate change.