

SECTION 2

THE ROLE OF THE UNION REP

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Local reps are important because they are the backbone of their union. Without representation at workplace level there would be no-one to act as the link between members, the employer and the union and no-one to organise, represent and negotiate on behalf of people in the workplace.

Here's a short list of some of the things union reps get involved in:

- › recruiting members into the union and organising them around workplace issues
- › talking to members about workplace issues, advise them and keep them informed of the latest developments
- › representing members who have problems
- › branch work and the wider union
- › negotiations with the employer.

Even so, depending on the nature of workplace and branch organisation not all union reps necessarily have the same roles within the union team.

For instance:

- › Not every rep gets involved in workplace disciplinary problems, although all would be interested in the outcome of individual representation cases.
- › All union reps will talk to supervisors and managers as a matter of routine but not all union reps will be involved directly face-to-face negotiations over key issues.

Why become a union rep?

There are all sorts of reasons. People may:

- › be good communicators and their work colleagues think that they would be good in the role
- › feel strongly about issues and want to change things for the better
- › be dissatisfied with something at work and want to have the rights of a rep to influence members and management
- › be persuaded to have a go by other union reps looking for strengthen the union team
- › be pleased with the outcome of a personal case that was handled by the union and want to give something back
- › be the only one to do the job because nobody else will try.



FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF

- › Talk to another union rep at work or contact your branch about becoming a union rep.

The way a union rep is chosen depends on the rules of their union. It will involve the relevant members and might be done a meeting, or via a postal ballot but once the decision is made the union will need to approve the appointment. The role new rep can take up their role once the employer has been notified by the union.

Here's more useful advice taken from experienced union reps:

- › Meet regularly with the employer and managers, both informally and informally, to get to know them. This is useful when planning how to take up an issue or in planning improvements in pay, terms and conditions.
- › New reps can shadow other more experienced colleagues in those meetings too. They can also get training from their union and the TUC as well as backup from experienced reps and branch officers at work.
- › A union rep can't do everything on their own. Reps often become involved in different activities depending on experience, skills and time. Union reps need to work together as a team, supporting each other, even if there are only two in the workplace!
- › Union reps need to be communicators, letting their members know what they are doing and why. This doesn't necessarily involve speeches at big meetings. The best way is through day-to-day conversation. If they are away from the workplace they should let their work colleagues know where they are.
- › Publicise union successes in negotiating with management and representing members in individual cases. Everyone in the workplace will be interested, it will help to retain support from members and open the door to recruit new ones.

- › Sometimes union members feel they can sort out issues on their own but everyone should be encouraged to see the union reps as their first resort, not their last!
- › Union reps are problem solvers but think the problem through first. Members may highlight workplace problems that perhaps need taking up with managers. Be careful though, sometimes an issue can be the result of a misunderstanding and not the sort of thing that needs to be raised with managers.
- › It can be useful to approach management to seek an informal solution to problems. That could be done through a brief meeting with the line manager, or even through a phone call. Take advice from someone with experience to help ensure that a problem isn't made worse.
- › If that doesn't work speak to senior workplace reps about using formal procedures. That should always be a collective decision by the union team and advice may be needed from the relevant union officer. Taking a step by step approach means better planning and will increase the chances of a successful outcome.
- › Apply collective thinking to representation work. Some issues arising from an individual case often turn out to be 'collective' in the sense that they affect a number of other people, not just the person who brought the problem forward in the first place.
- › This should always be borne in mind because taking up problems with the employer collectively can provide a stronger base from which to progress. Working with other union reps on issues that affect their members too can have more impact. It also means that the union can work towards resolving the underlying causes of discipline or grievance cases that come up again and again. That can make a big reduction in the number of cases union reps gets involved with, saving time and energy for other things. Management too gain from such an approach because it can help to make the workplace more efficient by also removing the causes of concerns that they also have.



DIFFERENT REPS, DIFFERENT ROLES

There are several types of union rep, with separate roles, although sometimes different names are used to describe them:

- › **Union rep or steward** - has statutory rights to represent members in the workplace and carry out other workplace duties.
- › **Health and safety rep** - has statutory rights to cover many aspects of health, safety and welfare in the workplace and attends health and safety committee meetings. In most unions the union rep and the health and safety rep are two separate positions. In other unions, once you become a union rep you are automatically the safety rep. They are, however, different roles.
- › **Union learning rep** - has statutory rights for promoting and organising education and training in their own workplace.
- › **Equality rep** - covers all aspects of promoting, organising and negotiating equality and fairness at work (see Section 3 on Equality).
- › **Senior steward or convenor** - is a union rep with a lot of experience of dealing with workplace issues and will represent the workforce at meetings with management to negotiate pay or changes in working conditions.
- › **Union full-time officer** - can be elected or appointed according to the union rule book. This officer works full-time for the union and supports all regional union activities and representatives. Their main function is to become involved in members' cases when they reach a higher level with management. Some unions also employ fulltime organisers to support branches.
- › What about non-members? Well, unions are membership organisations funded almost entirely from members' contributions. As a rep you should take every opportunity to encourage people to join the union. However, it must be noted that most people do come to the union in times of trouble or if they have a grievance. They will not normally be able to get assistance for things that happened before they became a member.
- › What if there is a complaint against another member? It may well happen that a rep takes up an issue for a union member against another person who is also a member of the same union. That member is entitled to representation too although not through the same union rep. There is a need to be careful, to be fair and to ensure that confidential information is not shared. Advice should be sought from the union to try and make sure the right approach is being taken.
- › What if a union rep feels they cannot help? Although union reps should always try to assist members, in some cases they may feel unable to help because they:

- are too close to the issue and cannot be unbiased
- know the member(s) involved too well
- feel out of their depth and without the relevant experience to take a case forward, e.g. the case is too complex
- fear that winning a case could adversely affect others' terms and conditions
- have been advised by the union that the case is not likely to succeed
- are concerned that a member has refused to take the advice of a rep on how to pursue a case.



CHECKLIST

Good practice for dealing with problems at work

- › Don't delay in speaking to members. A good rep listens to what is being said.
- › Aim to deal with issues informally and quickly once you are aware of them rather than dragging them out into formal, time-consuming procedures. Sometimes just threatening to take issues through the formal procedure will force the employer to make a decision quickly.
- › Become familiar with your own workplace agreements and procedures. Have your own copies or know where to find them.
- › Keep notes and copies of all dates, letters and documents relating to your union work. Keeping a diary is a useful method as you can always look back on it at a later date.
- › Get all the facts before you start a course of action. Sometimes claims are only rumours or members just want to let off steam at someone.
- › Don't try to move mountains. Take small steps but be well organised. Know your limitations and don't be afraid to ask for help. There is a vast resource of experience and expertise within the union that a rep can access.
- › Be clear about your objectives. Prioritise what needs to be done in your role depending on the needs of your members, and have a plan about what you want to do each week. Remember - failing to prepare is preparing to fail!
- › Do not speak or write to management or anyone else until you have planned your intervention and are sure what you want to happen. Formalise things only when you have exhausted all procedures. Always have a fall-back position - you won't win every time! Be prepared to compromise on some issues to gain success in others.
- › Communicate with all the reps in your workplace. There are many instances where you can act together.
- › Publicise your successes, which reminds employers of their responsibilities and encourages more people to join the union.

In any of the above circumstances, another rep or a union full-time official should take up the case, particularly if the case is complex:

- › Even when a member has contributed fully to the circumstances they are in, a rep can play an important role in ensuring that any disciplinary action taken against that member takes into account extenuating circumstances, is appropriate to the case and not inconsistent with other previous disciplinary decisions by the employer.
- › Sometimes, after pursuing a case through the available procedures, it may be that the workplace unions feels the case has reached the end of the line and no further progress can be made. Union reps should take advice on this.
- › Legal advice or legal representation is not generally appropriate or necessary. Reps should avoid giving interpretations of the law or promising success in a case. Every effort should be put into resolving employment relations problems at workplace level. If that is not done it is likely be the first issue picked up if the case gets as far as an employment tribunal hearing.
- › Where a workplace rep feels a case may require legal involvement, their union full-time officer should be contacted for advice. If an application for legal advice is thought necessary the members involved will have to follow the union's system for doing so.

More information

Acas

www.acas.org.uk

Online text helpline 0300 123 1100

Advice booklets and website covering all aspects of employment rights and rights for reps. This includes downloadable copies of all four Acas Codes of Practice.

Labour Research Department

www.lrd.org.uk

LRD is an independent research organisation publishing news and information for trade unionists.

LabourStartwww.labourstart.org

Trade unionists' news from around the world.

UnionRepswww.unionreps.org.uk

UnionReps is a TUC community where you can discuss tips, techniques or problems with other union reps and that has all the key online resources in one place.

WorkSmartwww.worksmart.org.uk

A TUC app for workers needing careers, skills and job advice

**UNIONS
IN ACTION**

"I became a union rep because nobody else wanted to do it. I did the TUC training, which was great because I met other reps from different workplaces and could see the differences from where I worked and how their unions were set up differently. When I went back to work I wanted to change the world but it was harder than that. I concentrated on getting one or two things done and that started to make members listen to me."

Daniel, GMB

"I needed to plan a strategy to recruit more members. The union needed to be more visible at work. It had to be a plan that I could achieve so I started talking to people in their breaks and many of them knew about the union but had never been asked to join. It didn't take long to get some to join. The next step will be to get more people to take on the rep's role."

Kunal, UNISON

"Meeting management for the first time was scary! Everything seemed so formal but the other stewards had held a pre-meeting which I was invited to and that really helped because I knew which reps would raise which issue on the agenda and what terms we would accept. I think you can achieve a lot by preparing beforehand and working out the essential bits of the agenda and what can wait until next time."

Tania, Usdaw