

TUC Equality Audit *2016*

Executive summary

Key findings

Over the past two years:

- ❖ Despite some improvements in the economic climate, 18 unions said that getting employers to address equality issues had become harder; only five said it had become easier.
- ❖ Almost a third of unions felt that employers' equality policies, or their implementation, had been diluted.
- ❖ Around one in six unions have provided advice to negotiators to help mitigate the impact of public spending cuts on equality.
- ❖ Equal pay remains the most common priority for unions.
- ❖ Bargaining for women is the area where most unions (56 per cent) have policies or guidance in place.
- ❖ Unions have had most success in negotiating equality policies in pay, with just over half reporting bargaining gains.
- ❖ Disability-related issues are by far the most common area (52 per cent) that workplace reps have tackled on behalf of members, with gender equality issues coming second (29 per cent).

Overview

The TUC and our affiliates are committed to promoting equality in all aspects of our work. In 2003, we changed our rules to reflect this goal and the biennial TUC Equality Audit is a key part of delivering on that commitment and tracking our progress. The audits alternate between looking at collective bargaining for equality, and union efforts to improve representation and participation. The 2016 audit focuses on collective bargaining, and was conducted for the TUC by the Labour Research Department (LRD).

This audit considers the huge range of issues unions address in their search for improved equality for all workers. It also examines the processes by which unions work to achieve it.

As in the earlier audits, this one was carried out through a survey of national TUC affiliates, to which

41 of the TUC's 52 affiliates replied. This response rate of 79 per cent is an improvement on the 67 per cent of 2012, and represents 97.6 per cent of the TUC's membership.

The national union survey was supplemented by two other pieces of research:

1. A survey of workplace reps across all unions to find out what equality issues they have been facing in their workplace and the training, information and support they use to help them deal with those issues.

2. An exploration of family-related leave, pay and flexible working aimed at obtaining local information not always held nationally. This comprised a second survey of reps, and an analysis of parental leave and pay agreements on the Labour Research Department's (LRD) Payline database of collective agreements.

Bargaining climate

Unions continue to face a difficult climate for bargaining. The weak and tentative economic recovery has not been felt by everyone. Real wages in the UK fell by more than 10 per cent from 2007 to 2015, and millions of people are in insecure work. Unions' comments reveal that this climate has not encouraged employers to address equality issues. Only five unions said this had become easier in the last two years, while 18 said it had become more difficult.

The most widespread reasons for this appeared to be financial, with many unions saying that employers faced pressure to focus on the bottom line at the expense of the needs of staff. One union reported that equality was seen by employers as a "luxury", a view echoed by others in both public and private sectors.

Around one in six unions have continued to provide advice and guidance to negotiators to help mitigate the impact of spending cuts on equality.

The introduction of fees in employment tribunals has also had a hugely significant impact, leading to a seventy per cent drop in individual claims, with women, BME, disabled and low paid workers hardest hit.

In this environment, almost a third of unions felt that either employers' equality policies, or their implementation, had been diluted in the last two years.

The bargaining process and guidelines

The audit looks at ways in which unions attempt to make progress on equality topics through their bargaining.

- ❖ Sixty per cent of unions try to set a national agenda for equality bargaining, with more than half of unions involving national equality officers in setting the overall collective bargaining agenda.
- ❖ The most common way that unions identify their equality bargaining priorities is on the basis of their national or sectoral conferences, although discussions between officials are almost as important. Six in 10 take recommendations from equality bodies in the union.
- ❖ Equality bargaining priorities over the last two years have varied, but the most common key issue has been equal pay.

Unions provide guidance and briefing materials to negotiators on a huge range of equality topics. A small number of unions have explicitly chosen to 'mainstream' equality bargaining, but many have taken steps to ensure that their general guidance for negotiators on issues such as pensions and pay takes account of the impact on women and minority groups.

In terms of policies or guidance on equality topics, the most common area for such materials is bargaining for women, especially on equal pay. A majority of unions also have guidance on working parents, disability, BME and LGB workers, with increasing numbers also producing guidance on trans workers.

Negotiating success

Despite a difficult bargaining climate, unions have had some success in negotiating improvements on a variety of equality-related topics in the last four years.

The most successful area is pay, for example, raising the wages of low-paid groups of workers. Next most common is bargaining gains for women.

Four in 10 unions said they had negotiated deals around flexible working. However, as in 2012, this success must be balanced against the experience of many local union reps who have again indicated that it has become harder in practice to get employers to accept flexible working requests.

Other areas where a good number of unions have negotiated equality improvements are: working parents and parents-to-be and carers; pensions and retirement; harassment and bullying; disability; and health and safety.

Areas for action

Workplace reps reported that they were far more likely to have tackled disability equality issues in the last two years than any other area, with over half of reps having dealt with disability-related issues. While it is encouraging that 37 per cent of unions reported bargaining success in this area, the sheer numbers of members who have raised this with their reps suggest that this will continue to be an important area of focus.

At the same time, there are a number of specific groups or issues where less than 25 per cent of unions report bargaining gains. These include: BME (24 per cent), LGBT (17 per cent), religion and belief (15 per cent) and older or younger workers (10 per cent). Disability and age were also highlighted as the two areas where most reps felt that more guidance was needed.

This audit has demonstrated that unions have made clear progress despite the difficult climate, particularly on gender, equal pay and flexible working. However, the upsurge in racist incidents and anti-immigration rhetoric in the aftermath of the recent EU referendum suggest that anti-racism and bargaining for race equality will be central to union work in the coming period, while continuing the fight to tackle inequality at work in all its forms.