**Trade Union Bill is an attack on democracy**

**Lords second reading debate last Monday exposed how dangerous the governments Bill proposals are on workplace democracy and hard fought for civil liberties.**

We heard concerns raised from right across the House about the threat this Bill poses to good industrial relations and fair treatment at work. Bishop of Rochester James Langstaff expressed concern that by focusing only on the “sharp end” of union activity, the Bill could put at risk the important role of unions in public life:

“Trade union activity when it works well, as it very often does, fosters good relationships in the workplace, reduces absences from work, resolves disputes, promotes mediation, avoids recourse to employment tribunals and the expense associated with them.”

As was the case with MPs, some peers displayed an extraordinary ignorance of what trade unions do and what they are for. Some peers seem very badly briefed:

**Lord de Mauley:**

*“I am also concerned that the number of days lost to industrial action in the public sector has doubled over 15 years.”*

This is false. There has been a 40% decrease in the last 15 years for days lost in the public sector.

And one Conservative peer effectively argued that social media is all the protection workers need to get fair treatment at work.

**Lord Bowick:**

*“We know that unions exist to protect against unfair employment practices, but nowadays we find that companies with such practices will disappear, not least because of the power of social media to spread bad news in lightning-quick time. We have seen many companies forced into public apologies in response to a so-called Twitterstorm. A company mistreating its employees would quickly receive negative headlines, and rightly so. Perhaps we can credit trade unions for helping to shape a society where bosses are as acutely aware of the need to treat employees well as are the employees themselves. But the truth is that with more information, particularly in this digital age, self-regulation is a lot easier, which perhaps diminishes the role of unions.”*

Lord Bowick excludes to mention the fact, that much of the recent naming and shaming of companies on social media has been driven by unions.

For example, Sports Direct’s recent fall from grace follows a concerted campaign by Unite, who have shone a light on the companies misuse of zero-hours contracts and bad corporate governance.

Unite, also helped expose how Pizza Express was charging low-paid staff an admin fee for tips left by card. Following a high-profile campaign Pizza Express dropped the charge. And Giraffe, Ask, Zizzi, Byron Burger and most recently the Casual Dining Group, owners of Bella Italia, Belgo and Cafe Rouge have all said they too will scrap the fee and hand 100% of tips to staff.

These are just a couple examples. As well as defending rights at work, unions also create more productive workplaces.

Each year more than more than 220,000 people are being given training and learning opportunities through their union every year.

If the government’s true aim here is to boost participation in strike ballots, then it should stop dragging its feet and allow union members to vote in workplaces and online.

[Online voting](http://touchstoneblog.org.uk/2016/01/official-people-back-online-strike-ballots-wont-tubill-allow/) in particular was mentioned by many peers, unable to see why the Government should claim it’s not secure enough for unions, whilst the Conservative Party themselves feel able to adopt it. Crossbencher Lord Adebowale said:

“If ever there was some evidence the intention of this Bill was perhaps not entirely honourable, it’s in the refusal to allow electronic balloting.”

It is essential that ministers listen to their Lordships before lasting damage is done.

We’ll be working to keep the issues high in the public mind over the coming weeks of Lords debate ([join our heartunions week of action](http://heartunions.org/) from 8-14 February to help), and there is much scope here for peers to perform their traditional role of holding bad legislation to the light of proper scrutiny, regardless of party affiliation.

Beth Farhat

Regional Secretary Northern TUC