

SECTION 3

GENERAL COUNCIL STATEMENTS

01. After the pandemic, a trade union action plan for a just, resilient future

The UK faces fundamental challenges in the coming decade. 2020 saw the deepest and fastest recession since the 1920s. We are in the aftermath of the pandemic, and there may be more pandemics to come. We face climate chaos – and the imperative to get to net-zero carbon emissions. The coming years will see new technology come into everyday use – which offers the chance of increased productivity but which could also be used in ways that reduce workers’ power and agency. We still live amid structural inequality that locks too many Black workers, women and disabled workers in poverty and out of opportunity. And we face the ongoing consequences of austerity on our public services and forty years of attacks on trade union rights – and on collective solutions to our common problems.

But we should take heart: the balance of power in the labour market is shifting. Staff shortages in key industries are beginning to bite, as the consequence of years of attacks on pay and conditions plays out. The pandemic made it clear that key workers, in both the private and public sector, are the people who keep our country going. The break caused by coronavirus has led people to think about what they want from work – and it isn’t the low-paid insecure jobs on offer in too many communities. Already, unions are beginning to win pay rises as membership continues to rise – and once again, the value of collective bargaining is part of the national debate. This is a moment of opportunity for the union movement and of potential for a better settlement for all working people.

Today, the union movement must say with a united voice: no return to the failed policies of the past. We must lead the calls for the UK to learn the lessons of the pandemic – and build an inclusive economy founded on justice and resilience, that delivers great jobs for everyone.

Lesson 1: when unions are in the room, better decisions are made

When the pandemic hit, unions stepped up. We joined the national effort to beat the virus and protect working people. We should be proud of this movement’s foresight and willingness to roll up our sleeves.

The early stages of the pandemic proved that union involvement, alongside government and businesses, makes better policy. Furlough was a union win. We came up with the idea for a job subsidy scheme. We called for it, campaigned for it and helped the Treasury create it. In particular, we argued for a high value – and achieved 80 per cent income replacement. We called for the self-employed income support scheme too. We have repeatedly won extensions to furlough, and have consistently championed it even as Tory ministers seek to disown it and right-wing newspapers have sought to shame businesses for using it.

The job retention scheme isn’t perfect – but it protected 11 million jobs, kept businesses afloat, and put cash in the pockets of working families to pay their rent and their bills. It’s

among the greatest of union achievements – and shows the value of getting the representatives of working people into the room alongside business and government.

Similarly, without unions, everyone would have been at far greater risk from the virus when at work. Union input vastly improved the sector-by-sector guidance published by government, helping union members and non-members alike stay safer in every workplace in Britain. Union health and safety reps negotiated safer working practices in thousands of workplaces – and blew the whistle on the scandal of inadequate PPE in health and social care. Yet huge gaps remained: ministers should have worked with unions and business to keep the guidance up-to-date as knowledge of the virus developed, and should have taken union advice to properly enforce the law on bad bosses.

Conversely, some of the greatest of mistakes of the pandemic response have been when union advice, sincerely given and well evidenced, has been ignored.

The most egregious example is the failure to extend statutory sick pay to every worker, and to uprate it to a liveable level. The failure on sick pay rendered ineffective the core tool we had to combat the virus pre-vaccines: self-isolation. Unions have been raising this issue since late February 2020. A humbler government would have acted to fix this glaring gap.

An inclusive economy needs clear and supported tripartite structures for the involvement of unions and business alongside government – nationally, at devolved levels, regionally, and sector-by-sector. Collective bargaining is the best way to deliver rights at work, manage industrial change and tackle inequality. The current crisis in logistics shows the value of sector-wide negotiations to manage the industry and improve wages and conditions. It's time to bring in sector collective bargaining, cut the red tape that prevents unions organising effectively and legislate for a union right of access to all workplaces. Let's match the ambition the Biden administration has shown for the role unions can play in rebuilding a fairer economy, after the years of attacks on trade unions in the UK and the US.

Lesson 2: governments can step in to protect their citizens in times of crisis – if they choose to

The coronavirus recession in the UK was unusual: the government stepped up to support individuals and businesses. The furlough and self-employment support schemes, the universal credit uplift and the business support combined to provide a better safety net (albeit still with significant gaps) that helped stop mass unemployment, saved firms and prevented a catastrophic loss in income for many families.

The lesson is that governments can powerfully intervene to protect their citizens, if they choose to. Never again will the country accept mass unemployment as the price to pay in a recession – however caused. Now they have seen the example of furlough – and that has raised expectations that government will step in to avert a crisis in livelihoods in the future.

The government seemed to want not to create a precedent or lasting change through their pandemic response. Now, as they end furlough prematurely, impoverish families by cutting £20 per week from universal credit, and withdraw all the support they put in place, it is up to the union movement to remind the country: unemployment is a choice, and throwing people into avoidable poverty is a choice. Governments can choose to step in and stop it. That is what they are for.

Lesson 3: think about equality from the outset and throughout

During the pandemic, it was clear that ministers were unable to conceive of the different lives of much of modern, multiracial, multifaith, working-class Britain. Their failure to consider the impact of their policies on the lives of Black workers, women and disabled workers, among others, was clear – and led to vastly unequal outcomes.

Women bore the brunt of care for children, friends and family, as schools, childcare and support services closed down – yet government policies seemed to expect women to fill the gaps. Government policies for dealing with the pandemic did not take account of the economic position of Black workers nor the structural inequalities that shape their lived experiences. Six in ten of all deaths involving Covid-19 were disabled people. During the pandemic, we have seen a rise in hate crimes directed at LGBT+ people, and LGBT+ workers have reported levels of abuse because they are visibly LGBT+ at work.

A just and resilient economy would assess the differential impact of a crisis and of a proposed crisis response on women, on Black workers, on disabled workers and on all those with a protected characteristic from the outset, and seek equitable outcomes that reduce poverty and inequality.

Lesson 4: bake resilience and justice into our economic model

The pandemic is not the only crisis our generation of trade unionists is likely to face. Climate chaos, the transition to net-zero, and the impact of new technology or the advent of a new pandemic may all create disruption to industries, jobs and livelihoods.

So, we need to advocate for an economic model that bakes in resilience to shocks, and justice for all working people. We can't repeat the mistakes after the financial crisis that saw long-term unemployment, especially among young people, the rise of insecure jobs, and no action to tackle gender inequality and structural racism. And we can't accept the failed experiment in privatisation and outsourcing of the past half-century.

Unions must make the case that the pandemic response was not about dealing with a crisis that was a one-off, but instead that it offers a model for the UK to build on to prevent unemployment and hardship in the future.

Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to the lessons of furlough. Unlike most other countries in the OECD, including Germany, Japan and many US states, the UK came into the pandemic without an established short-time working scheme – and then had to create one in a hurry. Now, instead of ending furlough prematurely, ministers should take the best of the job retention scheme and transform it into a permanent short-time working scheme as a post-pandemic legacy, to help protect working people through periods of future economic change.

A short-time working scheme would make the labour market more resilient in times of change and crisis, and would benefit workers, firms and government. It would reduce the risk of workers losing their jobs in times of crisis, and protect their incomes. It would prevent widening inequalities – protecting women, disabled workers and BME workers who tend to lose their jobs first in a recession due to structural discrimination.

It would prevent long-term unemployment and its devastating impacts on communities, help stabilise the economy, and encourage a faster economic recovery as workers continue to spend their wages. It would help skill up the workforce, providing funded training to any worker on less than 90 per cent of their normal working hours. Employers would save on

redundancy, training and hiring costs, as short-time working schemes enable firms to keep skilled workers on their books.

Alongside this, we need to see real investment in the skills the UK labour market needs to thrive. The UK faces a skills crisis, with employers in every sector concerned about major skills shortages. We need a new lifelong learning and skills strategy based on a vision of a high-skill economy, where workers are able to quickly gain both transferable and specialist skills to build their job prospects. This will require a significant boost to investment in learning and skills by the state and employers, with every worker having access to learning and skills entitlements throughout their working lives. The strategy should be guided by a partnership between government, employers and unions.

And there is no inclusive economy without decent work and decent wages. This pandemic has brutally exposed the terrible working conditions, low pay and insecurity many workers face. In the UK, 3.6 million people are in insecure work – including many key workers. That's one in nine people stuck in low-paid and high-risk jobs, often on contracts with few rights and no sick pay. It's time to end the scourge of insecure work. Unions can end insecure work organising on a workplace-by-workplace basis, but we also need a new deal for working people – bringing in a floor of new rights for working people across the economy, starting with banning zero-hours contracts and ending fire and rehire. And we need to end the low pay that traps working people in poverty: it's time to raise the national minimum wage to the level of a real Living Wage, of £10 per hour now – and rising fast in the years to come.

Nor can we build a decent society without decent public services. A decade of austerity left our public services unprepared for a pandemic – especially our NHS and social care system. It was only the huge efforts of staff that kept public services running. A just and resilient economy needs well-funded public services, run by valued and fairly paid workers, able to respond to times of crisis and embed fairness and equality. The coming spending review must invest in our NHS and all our public services. And we need a social care system that is adequately funded through a tax on wealth, with staff paid at least the real Living Wage through sector collective bargaining, and dignity for those who use social care.

Alongside rebuilding public services, we must restore the public interest to the heart of public services. Critical national infrastructure should be run in the public interest, be publicly accountable and wherever possible, be publicly owned. In-house provision of public services should become the default, unless there is a demonstrable public interest case for outsourcing.

Unions must fight to win a share of the gains of increased productivity of new technology for working people. New technologies like AI, automation and robotics could boost UK GDP by at least £200bn in the next decade. Bosses and shareholders must not be allowed to Hoover up all the gains from these new technologies. Working people deserve their fair share – using the gains from new tech to raise pay and allow more paid time off. Shorter working time, without loss of pay, should be a goal for the union movement this century, as new tech makes work more efficient and more profitable.

Unions, employers and government should work together to make sure that new technology benefits the UK workforce, through a new future of work commission. Even as new technology brings opportunities, it also brings risks. The use of AI at work has been accelerated by the pandemic, with AI-powered technologies now making high-risk, life-changing decisions about workers' lives, with little scrutiny. Left unchecked, AI could lead to greater discrimination, with workers in the gig economy and insecure work particularly at risk. We need a legal duty on employers to consult trade unions on the use of high risk and

intrusive forms of AI in the workplace, and a right for all workers to have a human review of decisions made by AI systems so they can challenge decisions that are unfair and discriminatory, alongside a legal right to switch off from work.

And we need to make sure the transition to net-zero comes with economic justice. The UK is still moving too slowly to reduce carbon emissions – and there are still too few safeguards to make sure the transition is speedy, just and equitable.

Ministers should implement the recommendations of their own Green Jobs Taskforce. The taskforce called for a new national body to ensure the climate transition delivers on jobs and leaves no worker behind – endorsing the TUC’s long-standing call for a Just Transition Commission that includes unions, government and employers. It called on ministers to set out how it will ensure that green jobs are good quality in its net-zero strategy, and it set out how employers should work with unions to transition their workforces and operations to meet the UK’s carbon goals.

The Green Jobs Taskforce called for greater public investment to decarbonise and retool UK industry and supply chains, to lead the climate transition and create the promised green jobs. The TUC has found that an investment of £85bn could create 1.24 million green jobs over the next two years in green infrastructure projects such as faster broadband, zero-emissions public transport and warmer homes.

Every part of the country needs new good green jobs – skilled jobs that help us get to net-zero, with decent pay and conditions. Net-zero can be delivered alongside security and opportunity for working people.

Conclusion

Trade unions have the answers to how we create a just and resilient economy and society.

Collective bargaining is the best way to deliver better rights at work, to tackle inequality and to manage change. During the pandemic, union membership rose – as workers saw the urgency of coming together to protect themselves at work. As a union movement, we will step up and deliver a step- change in organising - but we also need a government that will back us, getting rid of the red tape that holds us back, and inviting us to bring the voices of working people to the table. The Biden administration’s championing of unions and working people shows the way. When unions are part of decisions, policy is better. Furlough shows that. The UK needs its union movement in the room – so that we get on with delivering a just transition to net-zero, reskilling Britain and managing new technology.

And throughout we will keep on pushing for a collective transfer of power and wealth to working people in the UK and around the world – through better pay, equality at work, decent rights, reduced working time, great public services and a secure safety net, in working age and at retirement.

02. Taking forward the work of the TUC's Anti-Racism Taskforce

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the structural racism and deep racial inequality within society and the economy. Black workers and communities have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic – with Black workers more likely to be key workers, more likely to contract the virus and more likely to die, or to lose their jobs and livelihoods. For too many Black workers, low pay, insecure employment and discrimination at work are the norm.

The pandemic has highlighted the endemic low pay and occupational segregation faced by many Black workers. And a discriminatory labour market has left many Black workers at disproportionately greater risk of exposure to Covid-19 and dying on the job (see [Dying on the Job: racism and risk at work](#)).

The labour market was unequal long before Covid-19, but the pandemic has led to widening economic inequality, precarious employment and rates of unemployment amongst Black workers rising twice as fast as for white workers.

Securing the recovery from the pandemic means that we can't allow these inequalities to stand unchallenged. Our trade unions are determined to take the concerted action needed to eradicate the racism, discrimination and disadvantage that continue to deny many Black workers the opportunity to secure and progress in decent jobs.

The TUC Anti-Racism Task Force

The TUC's Anti-Racism Task Force (ARTF) is addressing these issues head on, not only identifying the issues facing Black workers but also taking decisive action, with TUC affiliates, to address them. It is our aim to use our trade union leverage to press for change across UK workplaces and to lead by example by demonstrating our capacity as a movement to demonstrate the means to secure racial justice at work.

Through the ARTF, our trade unions are working to confront institutional racism and discrimination at work. The Task Force has set about shining a light on racial injustice in the world of work and focused on organising, bargaining and campaigning to secure real change.

The ARTF is building on analysis of labour market developments and feedback from Black workers and trade union members, to strengthen the capacity of our trade union affiliates in our ongoing work to fight racism at work.

We will be working to turn research and evidence into action and real change.

Building on the commitments set out in the TUC Equality Campaign Plan, our trade unions will be campaigning to lead and win change for Black workers in our movement, in the workplace and across the wider economy through a renewed focus on trade union organising, stronger collective bargaining, campaigning and lobbying.

- Collective bargaining – putting race on the agenda will be our priority. We will be working to bring unions and employers together to work for change that will make workplaces safer, inclusive and fairer. And, we will be harnessing and building on the tools and strategies that our unions have already demonstrated are most effective in winning progress on racial justice in the workplace.
- Organising – diversity is our strength and we will be working to renew our unions, building and strengthening the cadre of Black union leaders and activists through a new TUC-led

programme to train 1,000 Black activists, working together with our affiliates across sectors and regions.

- Public policy – we will be calling out the government on its commitment to racial justice. Building on our movement’s call for an independent public inquiry into the government handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, we will also be giving voice to the experiences of Black workers during the pandemic, and demanding that lessons are learned. And, we will be putting forward an agenda that will deliver protections for Black workers, including calling for stronger regulation, strengthening the protections under the Equality Act 2010, mandatory race pay gap reporting, action to stop the use of fire and rehire practices, and legislation to ban the use of zero-hours contracts.
- Unions as employers – we are inviting all of our unions to not only talk the talk but also to demonstrate our capacity to lead by example, putting racial justice front and centre of our work as trade union employers. The ARTF will be supporting unions to drive the change to build inclusive and safe working environments for trade union employees.

Casualisation, privatisation and the emergence of a multi-tier workforce has hit Black workers particularly hard. Whether it is insecure contracts, unsocial shift systems, outsourcing or subcontracting, discrimination and segregation along race lines is all too often evident. Overcoming these inequalities through union organising, bargaining and campaign strategies must be a priority to ensure that every worker is treated with dignity and gets the New Deal we all deserve.

The pandemic and a hostile government agenda has deepened racial inequality and strengthened structural racism. The ARTF as leaders of the trade union movement will step up, alongside the wider anti-racist movement, and deliver tangible actions that will make a positive difference for Black workers.