

Unite communications brief

Reps and reality: Making Britain work

2011 was a busy year for the trade union movement as workers mobilised against the Con-Dem coalition's cuts. Activity stretched across the country with youth workers fighting back at Oxfordshire county council, health workers uniting to save the NHS outside local hospitals, Southampton and Birmingham's workers taking action as their councils tried to tear up their contracts and cut their pay while Derby's train makers at Bombardier fought to save British train manufacturing and construction workers took their protests over pay cuts and poorer conditions to all corners of the country.



And that was just the tip of the iceberg, action on a local level was echoed by the massive rally on 26 March which saw half a million people take the campaign against the cuts through London's streets and throughout the country as people marched for the alternative. And as the year drew to a close workers once more mobilised to protect their pensions whether in the private sector at profitable Unilever or on 30 November in the public sector where workers took action after being told to pay more, work longer and get less.

Trade unions were in the news because they were delivering gains for their members, but unions are not just good for workers – unionised workplaces have better terms and conditions, better pay and better productivity – they are also good for companies too, although some people don't see it like that...

A new attack on your rights

"Councils should be reviewing the merits of publicly funded full-time union officials. Those are non-jobs on the rates and it is wrong that council tax should be used to subsidise trade union activity." **secretary of state for communities and local government Eric Pickles, 5 December 2011**

Eric doesn't get it...

"I think the idea of full-time trade unionists, working in the public sector on trade union business rather than serving the public, I don't think that is right and we are going to put that to an end." **prime minister David Cameron, 30 November 2011**

And David doesn't get it...

As the Con-Dem coalition scrambles to cover up its failing economic policy it has reverted to type with new plans to chop workplace rights and union representatives. These two statements in the House of Commons in the space of a week show that the government is getting serious about its threat to cut back on union rights.

But the government is misguided and its actions would actually be bad not just for workers, but also for business, and bad for the UK economy as a whole. Why? Because of the real contribution of reps...

The reality behind workplace reps

Over **6.7 million workers** in the UK **belong to a trade union**. People join a union for support, advice and assistance in the workplace and of those workers around **200,000 carry out representative duties** whether that is checking on health and safety, providing formal or informal advice, helping with training and education, representing members at hearings and also negotiating with managers by acting as a single point of contact.

Union reps – Helping Britain work

Union reps are not only there to represent workers, their role makes a difference for employers and they are also a concrete resource, a BIS report from 2007 found reps offer support and savings to companies:

Reducing the number of employment tribunals saves companies and the exchequer between £22-£43 million annually	Reducing workplace injuries saves between £136-£371 million as a result of safety inspections and preventative measures
Savings by preventing work related illnesses of between £45-£207 million	Savings of up to £19 million by dealing with and reducing dismissals and claims
Savings on recruitment costs by reducing early exits of between £82-£143 million	Productivity gains worth a massive £4-£12 billion to the UK economy owing to training and education

In fact the figures say that the benefits that flow to the UK economy could be **saving up to £1.1 billion each and every year** as there are fewer tribunals, sick days, accidents and dismissals and better trained and motivated workers.

What do union reps get paid time off to do?

Union reps only get **PAID time off** for a tightly defined set of duties as listed on the left of the table.

PAID TIME OFF	NO PAID TIME OFF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiating with employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending internal union meetings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representing members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending union policy making meetings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performing health and safety rep duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voting in union elections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performing union learning rep duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with union officers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending union training courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing services of union learning reps

Many of these **duties offer concrete advantages to employers** as well as workers, for example a better trained workforce is more productive; workers are more committed to companies where they have a voice that is heard; and a safe workplace should be the rule not the exception. Even though a number of employers recognise the benefits and advantages and respect requests for time off, **reps do not automatically get paid time off for internal union business**. But that does not mean that reps don't go the extra mile...

Helping Britain work - Time for union reps

Another assertion made by the right is too much time is spent on union business, but how much time do they really take? Independent surveys have found that the average amount of time taken by senior reps was just over 10 hours a week (BIS report into facility time) and typically most union reps will receive between **one and two hours of paid time a week for union duties**. That is health and safety reps checking on security or learning reps training workers and building the skills base. And it is worth remembering that the work of reps is often difficult and demanding combining legal advice, support, negotiation and training.

But many union **reps also do additional work without pay in their own time**, in fact the same BIS report estimated that reps in the public sector contribute up to 100,000 unpaid hours of their own time each week, the current rules mean reps make the additional effort to keeps workplaces working.

Helping Britain work - The employers' view on union reps

So do companies want a change to workplace rules and reps? Companies are not driving this change, just the traditional right-wing ragbag of Tories that want to see an end to all workplace rights. They should listen to the companies and industry bodies: A joint TUC/Personnel Today survey which **polled HR professionals** and was conducted in mid 2010 saw over 50 per cent agree that: **"unions were an essential part of modern employer/employee relations."** The previous year (May 2009) the TUC and employers' organisation the CBI issued a joint statement praising the positive role of workplace reps stating how reps **"deliver real gains in the workplace"** and play a key role in producing **"innovative solutions that make a tangible difference."** That shows union reps make a positive contribution to companies, and it is one that is recognised by not just personnel but also senior management.

Conclusions

If workplace reps and union members are challenged about trade union time and reps, then simply highlight the following three key messages which show the real contribution that reps make to the UK economy:

- The government's own research shows employers recognise that workplace reps deliver real gains in the workplace and are essential to modern employer/employee relations
- More than 200,000 workers carry out representative duties with many working extra hours to support their company or help solve employment problems; paid time off is only for specific circumstances
- UK business benefits by as much as £1.1 billion every year thanks to union reps as they save on recruitment costs, prevent workplace accidents, and help train, retain and motivate workers

For Britain to compete in the modern globalised economy it needs a motivated, educated and committed workforce; trade unions are a key in delivering that aim. Government attempts to water down or erase workplace rights are a false economy as blinkered as the Con-Dem coalition's plans for the country. Make sure you speak up for trade union rights, make sure you speak up for your rights because the evidence shows union reps add value and help make Britain work.

Challenging the Tory fronts calling for an end to workplace reps

The Trade Union Reform Campaign

David Cameron has endorsed a new campaign body looking to eradicate workplace rights. In December 2011 this new body - the so-called [Trade Union Reform Campaign](#) - was established with the Cameron anointed novice Tory MP Aidan Burley as chair.

TURC's 'supposed' reform campaign has five key aims that simply want to remove union rights and representation. It is just another attack on what unions do in the workplace. The argument that TURC is peddling - and that Cameron is endorsing - is all focused on the cost to employers of providing paid time off for union representatives, but it fully ignores all the benefits that are not just for workers, but for companies, the public sector and all taxpayers.

Burley was thrust into the limelight after pictures emerged of him attending a Nazi-themed stag party in France. He was eventually sacked from his government job as a parliamentary aide to transport secretary Justine Greening in December after a series of increasingly [damning revelations](#), story-changes, and heavy criticism from Jewish organisations. He is currently being investigated, along with other party guests, by the French police.

Challenging TURC's claims – the risk and the reality

The details outlined below show that the so-called Trade Union Reform Campaign's five key aims are the demands of an isolated, badly informed group with a separate agenda to run down the public sector in preparation for the wholesale privatisation of public services. Indeed Burley has gone to ground after having been forced to resign as a parliamentary aide after joining a Nazi-themed stag party in France.

TURC CLAIMS	THE REALITY
Public bodies should not pay for time spent by employees on trade union activity	Union reps make a concrete contribution helping deliver savings for business and public bodies worth as much as £1.1 billion to the UK economy each and every year
The Trade Union Modernisation and Trade Union Learning Fund should be scrapped	Workplace training and education boosts skills, enhances productivity and benefits both the employer and employee
Public bodies should charge commercial rates for trade union usage of facilities	Union reps are employed to work on company or organisation related business, following TURC's route would mean that every worker would be charged to sit at their own desks
Public bodies should not be involved in the collection of trade union dues	In the same way that workers donate to charity through payroll, this is just another box that needs to be ticked
All public money, resources, paid and unpaid time off given to trade unions should be accounted for and published	Public bodies are under a detailed series of obligations to publish information under the Freedom of Information Act, any interested parties should pay to make their own requests

Jesse Norman MP and the Free Enterprise Group

Jesse Norman, the Conservative MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire, is backing a ten minute rule bill on Trade Union Officials (Refund of Pay to Employers) which will be heard in parliament on Wednesday 11 January 2011 straight after the first prime minister's questions of the year.

Eton and Oxford educated, Jesse Norman is the son of the British businessman, former investment banker and multi-millionaire Sir Torquil Patrick Alexander Norman. Before he was an MP he was a director at the investment banking arm of Barclays, BZW from 1991-1997 and then worked for 10 years at the Roundhouse arts venue, which had been conveniently been bought by his father as 'an impulse buy'.

Jesse Norman MP was first elected in 2010 and has been one of the proponents of 'Compassionate Conservatism' co-authoring a Policy Exchange pamphlet on the subject. He has made multiple pronouncements on what he considers the problems facing the UK economy and has attacked 'crony capitalism' which he claims disguises economic reality, shields underperformance, cossets poor management and leaches away value. Norman's claim is for the focus to return to the culture and values of the economy.



However Norman does not explain why potential plans for reducing trade union representation will assist in his aims? In fact in many cases trade unions act as a check and balance on business, restricting excessive pay and highlighting pressures facing companies from the shop floor, that is something that should be encouraged and supported not left to the market to decide.

Norman is also the chair of the chair of all-party parliamentary group on employee ownership which would encourage employees to take a greater stake in their companies, but it seems only on the bosses say so.

And Unite's facilities agreement with Norman's former firm Barclays has a detailed section which agrees to allow paid time off for workplace reps carrying out union duties. It seems that Norman is proposing different rules for the public sector in contrast to those that he would probably have agreed in his role as a director with Barclays in the private sector.

The Taxpayers Alliance and Priti Patel MP

Another MP that has been trying to raise her profile by jumping on the bandwagon of attacking union rights is Priti Patel, the new MP for Witham. Her first job was working for Andrew Lansley as the then head of Conservative Research Department, now mishandling the health and social care bill through parliament.

Her most high profile appearance was a catastrophic turn on BBC's Question Time, but last year she also launched a 50 page report calling for reform to trade union laws and cutting taxpayer support to unions.

The spurious report challenges facilities time, complains about providing training and learning for union members and attacks the link between Labour and unions.

In reality it is simply another union bashing excuse from the so-called Taxpayers Alliance, a shadowy organisation that claims to speak up for taxpayers but is essentially a Tory front, so said Labour's Jon Cruddas: **"This is an arms-length Tory front operation run by big powerful business interests who want to remove themselves from paying tax by poisoning the well of public debate around the issue."** One of its major backers is the Midlands Industrial Council which has also donated £1.5 million to the Conservatives since 2003.



Additional/supporting Information

1. Workplace Representative: A review of their facilities and facility time – BERR consultation document - <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file36336.pdf>
2. Reps In Action – Joint BIS/TUC/CBI publication on the value of union reps <http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/repaction.pdf>
3. The Road to Recovery: How effective unions can help rebuild the economy - TUC Touchstone Pamphlet <http://www.tuc.org.uk/economy/tuc-17727-f0.cfm?themeaa=touchstone&theme=touchstone>
4. Code of Practice on Time of for Trade Union Duties and Activities ACAS publication - <http://www.acas.org.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=274>
5. Political Scrapbook: Aiden Burley and his nazi stag party antics - <http://politicalscrapbook.net/2012/01/anti-semitism-training-for-mps/>
6. Wikipedia entry for Sir Torquil Patrick Alexander Norman CBE - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torquil_Norman
7. Wikipedia entry for Taxpayers Alliance - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TaxPayers'_Alliance