



Amicus

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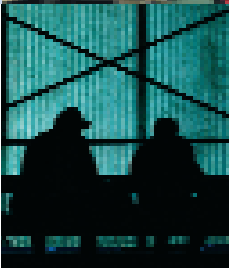
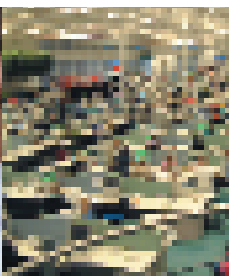
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Guide to Trade Unions



Amicus Guide
for members



2005


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■ INTRODUCTION

Few people outside trade unions have a real understanding of the work that they do and the services they provide. For most people, newspapers, television, family and friends provide the information for which people's opinions are based on. Rarely does this give a balanced assessment of both sides of the industrial relations coin, and rarely does it reflect the reality of trade unions operating in the present day. And nowhere are these misconceptions more apparent than amongst young people.

The Trade Union, Amicus supports over one million working people, throughout the public and the private sectors. This booklet explains both how and why. From negotiating pay to offering pensions advice, Amicus offers much-needed advice in all areas of the workplace and beyond, and we are adapting to face the changes and problems that our members face on a daily basis.

Trade unionists have a unique insight into the world of work. This booklet shares their experience, explains their role and aims to help pupils and students understand why over seven million members look to their trade unions for advice and support.

■ WHAT IS A TRADE UNION?

Trade unions are about people and all sorts of people join. Whether they work in a factory, the health service, education or local government, or are skilled engineers or workers in the financial community, many people have come to understand that they can achieve more in the workplace together, than alone. In fact, the recent growth of professional trade unions shows that more people from all walks of life see the sense of this idea, and it is this belief and commitment to each other that gives trade unions their strength.

A simple definition of a trade union is an association of employees who, through combined negotiation with employers, aim to improve the conditions in which they work. Without doubt, this has been the historic reason for trade unions to exist—and continues to be a major reason for their relevance today.

Fairness is essential for a smooth-running workplace. When the balance of power between employer and employee is misused, fairness is often forgotten. On their own, individuals stand little prospect of restoring the balance. Together, through trade unions, there is a much greater chance that employees' voices are heard and grievances addressed. Trade unions are there to ensure working people have a fair deal at work.

■ WHY DO WE NEED TRADE UNIONS?

Think of all the various issues that are important in the world of work. Each one is an aspect of what is termed 'industrial relations'. They include the following:

- pay and working conditions
- job security
- redundancy procedures and provisions
- health and safety
- career development
- training and skills
- equal opportunities and non-discrimination
- maternity and paternity leave
- pensions

Add to these potential disciplinary problems and the raising a complaint about your work, and it becomes clear that there is much more to being employed than simply the work itself.

Would you be able to deal with each and every issue? The chances are you might not. After all, it would be unreasonable to expect each employee to possess detailed knowledge of employment law, pay negotiation or health and safety regulations. How many understand the intricacies of pensions and human resource management? Quite simply, with the increased pressures in the modern working environment, employees cannot find the time, and often the energy, to master each element of industrial relations. Trade unions can and do.

Through a system of elected workplace representatives known variously as shop stewards, representatives and convenors, Amicus ensures that in most workplaces where it has members, a small number take responsibility for

dealing with any issues the others may have. These representatives deal directly with the employer on behalf of other union members in the workplace. Specialist representatives may also be elected to ensure that members' health and safety is protected at work, and now the provision to elect learning representatives exists also.

At the union's centre, research, legal, education and policy support teams exist to provide advice to members on everything from employment law, latest developments in your industry, to training information.

Trade union members draw on the collective expertise of their trade union. They have the support of people whose job it is to represent them on issues about which they are unsure. Combined with the collective strength of the union as a whole, this is a powerful way of making sure they are both treated fairly and that they work safely.

■ WHAT DO TRADE UNIONS DO?

Negotiating with employers over pay and conditions is still a major element of trade union activity. Our own Union, Amicus, is renowned, through collective bargaining, for achieving improved conditions in the workplace for its members. We support employers who want to give their employees the best. And we work to ensure those employers who don't, come to see the benefits of good standards, whether it be on the production line or in the office. And where there is a good, strong, organised trade union, pay rates are likely to be higher. However, Amicus, and trade unions as a whole, do much more than bargain over wages and working practices.

In today's knowledge-based economy, education and training is vital — and trade unions offer the chance to brighten your own prospects. Whether you want to learn new skills or upgrade existing ones, trade unions have the ability to help. Indeed, it is acknowledged that Amicus offers the best training facilities in the country for its members. We help members get on with their careers, helping them into a better job or to gain promotion from their existing one.

A good example of this is learning representatives. New laws mean that you have the right to elect a learning representative in the workplace. They will provide information and advice about learning or training matters; arrange learning or training; promote the value of learning or training; and consult the employer about learning and skills activities relevant to members of the trade union.

Of course, extra training is of little use if the workplace is unsafe. Trade unions also elect well-trained health and safety representatives to monitor standards and work with employers and employees to prevent accidents.

In fact, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 was brought about largely because of pressure from trade unions.

However, should an accident occur, trade unions offer full support to the injured. Amicus and its lawyers fight for compensation and win millions of pounds every year for members — money that is crucial, yet less likely to be awarded without the aid of trade union representation.

Actually, the legal services offered go further than those in the event of injury. Many unions give members free legal advice on employment law and other issues. Some, such as Amicus, have their own legal department, and in the event of serious unfair treatment, trade unions represent their members, through nominated lawyers at Employment Tribunals.

Support from trade unions extends beyond the world of work. Increasingly, they are expanding into consumer services. The growth of the Amicus membership means we have been able to secure good discounts on a range of services. These include loans, insurance, mortgages, membership of motoring associations and even discounted holidays. Having led the nationwide campaign for a shorter working week, Amicus not only helps members have more time, it offers them the chance to spend less on their leisure activities!

■ ARE TRADE UNIONS RELEVANT TO YOUNG PEOPLE?

Each year school and college leavers enter an uncertain and insecure world of work. Most young people are not going to the same job for the rest of their working life. Whilst youth unemployment is lower than it has been in a decade, due to the uncertain nature of the world economy, we cannot guarantee that the work force will remain the same. At the moment some manufacturing industries are in decline and fewer young people are being taken on as apprentices.

There are increasing demands for high added value jobs and a high skilled workforce to compensate for the loss of more traditional jobs. This means that the work force of the future needs trade unions of the future, and this is why Amicus has developed a structure which encompasses all areas of the economy. People need a trade union that they can remain a member of throughout their working lives, and a union that will continue to represent them, and being a member of Amicus can ensure just that wherever you work.

■ RECENT CHANGES

Since 1997 we have seen many changes in industrial relations. Many of these have proved positive for our members. One of the most important of these for trade unions is the establishment of a legal right to be recognised for collective bargaining purposes.

Some changes:

- Unemployment is at its lowest since 1975 and employment has now risen by around 1.5 million.
- Long-term youth unemployment has fallen by around 75% and 362,110 young people have been helped to move from welfare to work through the “New Deal” scheme.
- In 1998, the first-ever National Minimum Wage was introduced, and is now paid at £4.85. It has already benefited more than 1.5 million workers, many of who are women and part-time employees.
- The Employment Relations Act 1999 and Social Chapter have established new rights for all workers including protection against unfair dismissal reduced from two years to 12 months and protection for employees on zero hours contracts.
- The Employment Relations Act also included a statutory right to trade union recognition where a majority votes for it in organisations of over 20 employees.
- The Employment Relations Act 2004 has also introduced improved rights for workers when involved in disciplinary and grievance procedures.
- It is now illegal to discriminate against someone on grounds of trade union membership.
- For the first time ever UK workers are legally entitled to four weeks paid holiday, no obligation to work more than 48 hours per week and at least one day off per week.

These changes happened, because of trade unions like Amicus campaigning to ensure a Labour victory and campaigning within the Labour Party to ensure that their policies deliver a better deal for working people in this country.

■ TRADE UNIONS ARE GAINING POPULARITY

We are witnessing a revitalisation of trade unions and a resurgence of popular sympathy towards them. Today, they enjoy a more favourable image in the public eye.

Trade union membership continues to increase, employees are seeing the benefits that a trade union can offer and now, through new information and consultation regulations, employees will have the right to be informed and consulted. Informed and consulted about the business's economic situation, about employment prospects, and decisions likely to lead to substantial changes in work organisation or contractual relations, including redundancies and transfers. Trade unions have the collective skills and resources to deliver effective results from these new rights.

Amicus believes in working with employers to achieve good working conditions and job security for its members. Amicus is also prepared to campaign widely in the community for even better rights for workers and to secure fair treatment for all. It uses its strong links with the labour movement to achieve this and has recently been successful in securing a number of commitments from the government which, when implemented, will enhance the social and economic well being of Amicus.

■ TRADE UNION HISTORY

No guide to trade unions is complete without its background history. Trade unions have a rich tradition, of which members are rightly proud.

The first trade unions appeared in Britain in the 18th Century. Forced to meet in secret, early trade unionists feared for their lives as well as their livelihoods. Their struggle against a hostile government and resistant employers proved to be both violent and long drawn-out. Perhaps the best-known example of that is the Tolpuddle Martyrs - an early tale of oppression and injustice.

Sentenced in 1834 to be transported to Australia for seven years, six farm labourers from the Dorset village of Tolpuddle became national symbols for trade union activity. Of what were they guilty? Their crime was the administering of illegal oaths - or, in today's language, for having organised themselves into a trade association, with a view to protecting, and improving upon, their meagre rights. They founded a branch of the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers, something to which the law and their employers did not take to kindly. Today, trade unions do not forget that because of the courage and vision of those like the Tolpuddle Martyrs, trade unionism was established in Britain.

It is easy to take for granted the conditions which modern workplaces offer employees. Without the campaigning and work of trade unions over the last two centuries, many of the current workplace practices and conditions would not have been achieved. There is still much to do to achieve the balance and fairness which Amicus believes is the right of all workers and we hope that by joining Amicus you will play your part in improving working conditions now and into the future.