



# **From Crisis to Change: Coming out of COVID-19**

**A report on a survey of  
Unite Workplace Representatives**

**May 2020**

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### A report on a survey of Unite Workplace Representatives

#### Executive summary

- **Unite workplace representatives (reps) are at the forefront of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis at work.** This reports on their insights into how the crisis is being dealt with and what should happen next.
- **Nearly two-thirds (65%)** report that their **employer is behaving responsibly.** However, **nearly 1 in 5 (18%)** said that that their **employer is behaving recklessly to the crisis** citing practices such as lack of PPE.
- **Nearly half (46%)** said **“my employer has gone over and above its legal duties.** However, **over one in ten respondents (14%)** said **“my employer is taking advantage of the crisis”.**
- Reps are negotiating with employers on a range of issues including **health and safety measures, furlough, home working, wage protection, sick pay, and a planned return to work.**
- Initial analysis suggests that ‘responsible’ employers are negotiating with Unite reps and, where this is happening, there is a **Unite premium** with those employers going ‘over and above’ their legal duties.
- **Mental health tops members’ issues that reps are dealing with** with nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents reporting having to deal with an increase in members reporting mental health-related issues.
- **98%** agree that **‘public service workers are undervalued for the work that they do and should be paid more’** and **89%** agree that **‘privatisation of public services has made dealing with the COVID-19 crisis more difficult’.**
- **All** agreed that **‘Government must act to make sure that our public services get the funding and support they need’,** but **less than half (42%)** think that **they actually will.**
- **98%** agreed that **‘the crisis has shown that more workers must be recognised as ‘key workers’ than previously thought’.**
- Unite reps overwhelmingly see **coming out of the crisis as a chance to improve things and to do so significantly.** **85%** said that **‘we cannot return to the way things were, but this crisis presents an opportunity to do things better’.**
- Asked what should be in the **Government’s strategy** for after the crisis, there was overwhelming support for:
  - a ‘new economy, underpinned by **secure employment and decent pay and conditions’;**
  - ‘putting **workers and trade unions at the centre of a new economy,** both in the workplace and society’; and
  - a ‘more **environmentally sustainable economy’.**
- There is also strong support for a **‘stronger social security system’,** a **‘programme of state investment,** including through **extending public ownership’,** and **‘helping to pay for dealing with this crisis through fair and progressive taxation’.**

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and is having, a devastating impact. Notwithstanding the health crisis, this has been particularly felt in the world of work with many jobs – and indeed sectors - placed at risk, and new challenges and strains put on workers and their representatives.

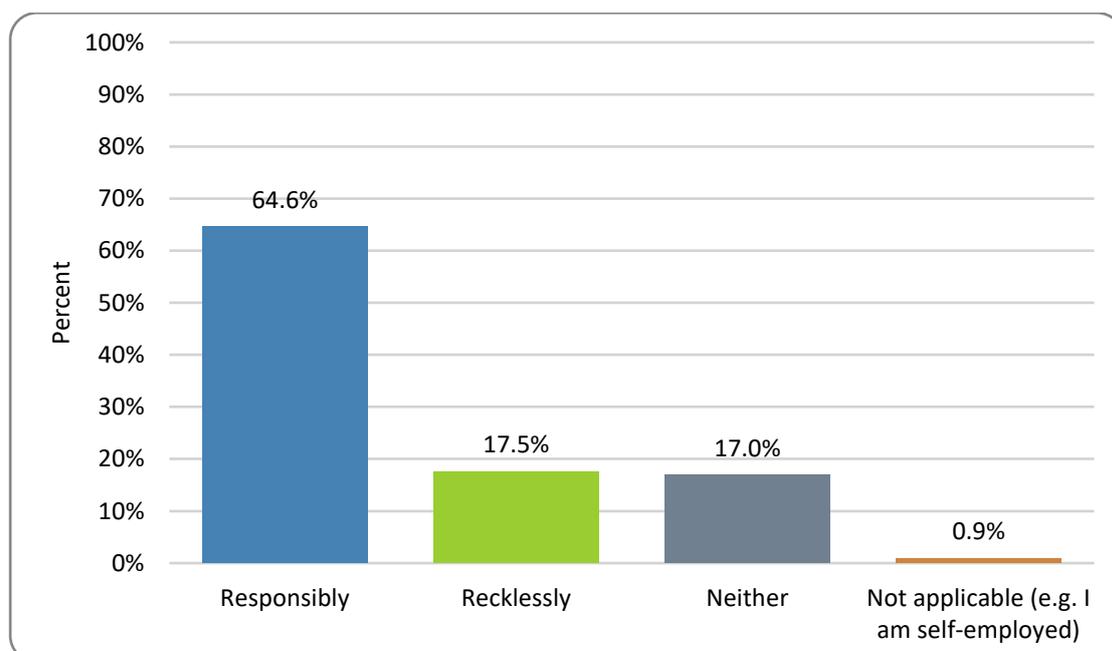
Unite workplace representatives (reps) are at the forefront of dealing with the crisis at work, so it is particularly valuable to get their insights into how the crisis is being dealt with and what should happen next.

This paper reports on initial findings of an online survey distributed to all Unite reps in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland<sup>1</sup> that was live between 29<sup>th</sup> April and 5<sup>th</sup> May 2020. Responses were received from 1360 reps from across all of Unite’s industrial sectors and regions. Further analysis is planned looking at variables such as sectoral breakdown.

### Employer responses to the crisis: responsible or reckless?

Respondents were asked about how their employer is dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. **Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents report that their employer is behaving responsibly.** Examples include protecting workers’ health and safety in respect of things like Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and social distancing. **However, nearly 1 in 5 (18%) said that their employer is behaving recklessly** to the crisis citing practices such as lack of PPE (see Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1: Employer responses to the crisis**



(Note: Question: Overall, how do you think your employer is responding to the Covid-19 crisis? (N=1351))

<sup>1</sup> Approximately 22,000 reps

When asked to pick a statement that best sums up their employer's response **nearly half (46%) said "my employer has gone over and above its legal duties to protect staff, their jobs, wages and terms and conditions"**. The most common example given was the paying of full pay to furloughed workers (above the 80% provided by the Government's Job Retention Scheme).

**Over one in ten respondents (14%) said "my employer is taking advantage of the crisis"**. Examples include attacking terms and conditions, forcing workers to take annual leave, and making redundancies rather than using the Government's Job Retention Scheme. 40% said "My employer is only doing the legal minimum they have to".

When asked if their employer was negotiating with them and/or appropriate Unite reps, over half of respondents (57%) reported that they were **negotiating with their employer on social distancing and other new health and safety measures**. Other main issues for negotiation were **furlough** (Government Job Retention Scheme) (47%), **home working** (41%), **wage protection** (26%), **sick pay** (25%), and a **planned return to work** (25%).

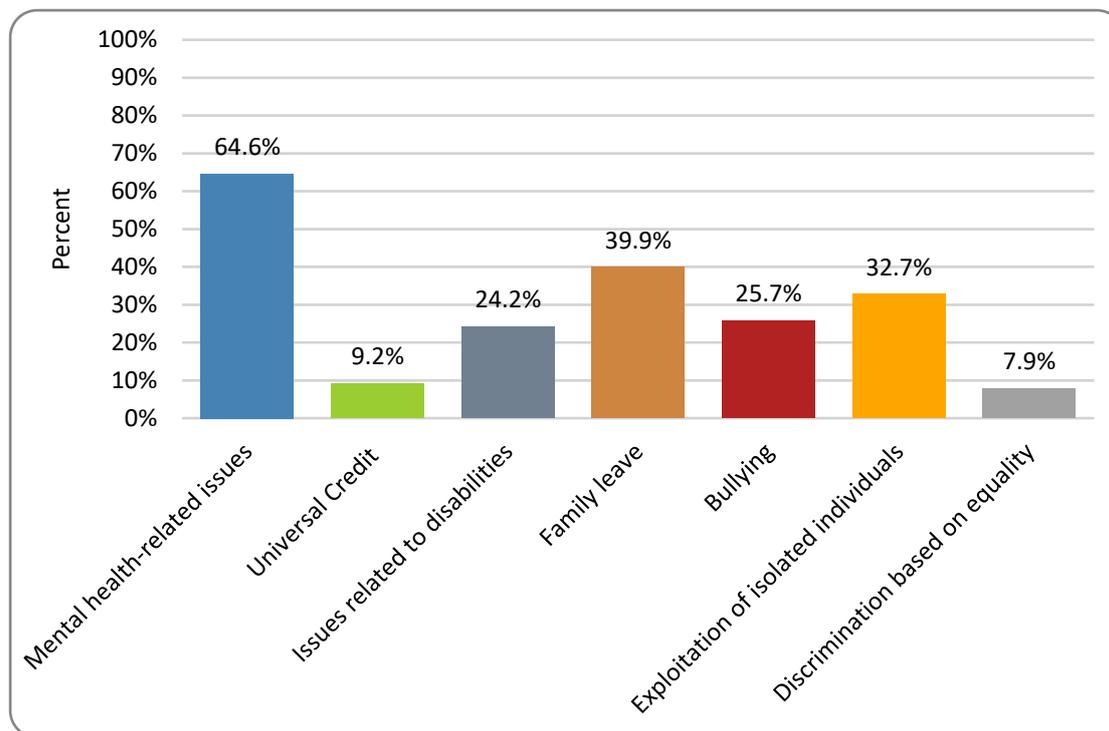
Of those who said that their employer was negotiating with them on furlough or wage protection, 60% said that their employer is paying above the 80% provided by the Government's Job Retention Scheme. And of those who said that their employer was negotiating with them on sick pay, 83% said that their employer is paying above statutory sick pay (SSP).

Initial analysis suggests that 'responsible' employers are negotiating with Unite reps and, where this is happening, there is a **Unite premium** with those employers going 'over and above' their legal duties.

### **Mental health tops members' issues that reps are dealing with**

**Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents reported having to deal with an increase in members reporting mental health-related issues**. Other issues that respondents reported increases in include 'concerns over **pregnancy, maternity, paternity, adoption or other family leave**' (40%), '**employers or managers exploiting the isolation of individual members**' (33%), '**bullying**' (26%), '**issues related to disabilities**' (24%), 'members applying for **Universal Credit**' (9%), and '**discrimination based on equality**' (i.e. sex, race, disability, LGBT+, age, religious, nationality discrimination) (8%) (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2: Increases in members' issues dealt with by Unite reps**



Note: (Question: In your capacity as a Unite rep, have you had to deal with an increase in the following during the crisis? (Tick as many as apply) (N=797)

### **Public services and key workers**

Not surprisingly, and in tune with the mood of the country generally, Unite reps are hugely supportive of our public services and key workers, with **98% of respondents agreeing<sup>2</sup> that 'public service workers are undervalued for the work that they do and should be paid more'**.

**89% agreed that 'privatisation of public services has made dealing with the COVID-19 crisis more difficult'.**

**All (100%) respondents agreed with the statement that 'Government must act to make sure that our public services get the funding and support they need'. However, less than half (42%) think that the Government actually will.**

**Nearly all (98%) respondents agreed that 'the crisis has shown that more workers must be recognised as 'key workers' than previously thought' and a similar proportion (95%) agreed that 'recognition and pay of key workers should be based on the value of their work to society'.**

<sup>2</sup> 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' combined

## What next? From crisis to change

The COVID-19 pandemic has had, and is having, a devastating impact. However, Unite reps – who have been at the forefront of dealing with it at work – overwhelmingly see coming out of the crisis as a chance to improve things and to do so significantly.

**Over eight in ten respondents (85%) said ‘we cannot return to the way things were, but this crisis presents an opportunity to do things better’.** Just under one in ten (9%) said ‘there is no prospect for a return to the way things were, but things are only going to change for the worse after this crisis’.

## Home working

Home working has clearly been a significant part of how many parts of the workforce have had to deal with the crisis and, as reported earlier, many Unite reps have been involved in negotiations about home working, so will have valuable insights into how it is playing out now and how it might develop in the future.

Over half of respondents (55%) said that their employer had introduced home working, and of those third (34%) agreed **‘the problems of home working outweighed the benefits’** compared to two thirds (66%) who disagreed suggesting that there are opportunities here too.

**Over half (54%) of those who said that their employer had introduced home working said that their employer will look to extend home working** after the COVID-19 crisis and **nearly four out of five (79%) agreed that home working presents an opportunity to improve working life.** However, it should also be noted that **39% said that ‘home working will be used by my employer to avoid their responsibilities’** with 61% disagreeing with the statement. There was near unanimity (98%) that **‘home working arrangements must be properly negotiated with trade unions’.** This echoes concerns raised by industrial sectors that some employers may attempt to make home working permanent for white collar and call centre workers.

In terms of carrying out their own duties, **just under half (45%) said that as a Unite rep, the increase in home working created new problems for coordinating their work** with members and other reps, with slightly more (55%) disagreeing with the statement. Not surprisingly, many of the problems concerned communication and the most common way that this was overcome was through increased use of technology and platforms such as Zoom and Skype.

## From crisis to change: what should be in the Government’s strategy?

Not only do Unite reps see an opportunity for change as we come out of the COVID-19 crisis, they have pretty strong views about what that change should look like. Asked what should be in the Government’s strategy for after the crisis, there was

overwhelming support for a **‘new economy, underpinned by secure employment and decent pay and conditions’ (99% agree)** and **‘putting workers and trade unions at the centre of a new economy, both in the workplace and society’ (98% agree)**.

Equally important is a **‘more environmentally sustainable economy’ (97% agree)**, putting Unite reps right at the heart of demands for a green industrial revolution and a ‘just transition’.

There is also strong support for **‘a stronger social security system’ (92% agree)**, a **‘programme of state investment, including through extending public ownership’ (90% agree)**, and **‘helping to pay for dealing with this crisis through fair and progressive taxation’ (86% agree)**.

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