

# Trade unions: dealing with change

## Learning outcomes:

As a result of carefully reading this case study, students should be able to:

- **identify elements** in the changing environment facing trade unions in recent times eg the impact of privatisation
- **show that public service unions** have joined together to respond to this changed environment eg the formation of UNISON
- **explain how unions** still play a role in promoting fairness in the workplace
- **show how unions** such as UNISON have played a part in improving the lives of working women
- **explain** the organisational structure of a union, showing the organisation of branches, and the relationship between a branch and the central organisation of the union
- **identify** some key roles in a trade union eg shop steward, branch secretary, etc
- **identify advantages** of being a member of a trade union, particularly for a young person.



## Introduction

"Trade unions? Just groups of men who shout a lot and call strikes. They're dinosaurs, unwilling and unable to respond to a changing world. They're finished."

Is that your view of trade unions? Really? And you don't know of trade unions with more women members than men? So:

- Where has your knowledge and view of trade unions come from?
- If unions really are dinosaurs, why are they still so prominent in a changing world of work?

This case study looks at how trade unions:

- still play a vital role in promoting fairness in the workplace
- achieve big improvements in the lives of working women.

## UNISON's origins

During the 1980s and early 1990s, British trade unions adapted to meet the challenge of an ideologically hostile Conservative government that introduced **legislation** aimed at curbing trade union activities. Within various sectors of the UK economy trade unions decided to pool resources rather than stay separate – "United we stand".

UNISON was formed in July 1993 when three well-established trade unions with a common interest in public services joined together:

- COHSE (the Confederation of Health Service Employees)
- NALGO (National Association of Local Government Officers)
- NUPE (National Union of Public Employees).

They recognised that their working environment was changing dramatically and that to stay relevant and effective they had to adapt.

## UNISON's structure

UNISON is the UK's largest trade union. Its 1.3 million members work in public and other essential services. Over two thirds of UNISON members are women. Members work in several different industries eg local government; healthcare; education; the utilities (electricity, gas, water); transport; the police service; the voluntary sector and call centres.

Their occupations vary eg nurses; health care assistants; ambulance staff and paramedics; laboratory technicians; town planners; grave diggers; plumbers; support staff; nursery nurses; classroom assistants; school meals staff; long-term care assistants; environmental health officers; senior executives and managers at all levels in many different industries and businesses.

UNISON employs its own staff based in a national office in London and also in 13 UK regional offices.

The General Secretary is a paid officer. Members vote the General Secretary into office. The General Secretary's role is roughly equivalent to that of a Chief Executive.



UNISON also has a President. This is an elected post, taken up by a 'lay' (voluntary) union member. The National Executive Council (NEC) is the union's policy making body. It comprises 'lay' members who are voted onto the Council by their local membership. NEC members are accountable for their actions to the union members, who form the electorate. UNISON's leaders are democratically accountable: they hold office only for as long as members vote for them to be there.

All members belong to one of UNISON's 1,200 branches across the UK. A branch may consist of all members who work in a hospital, a council office, or as civilian staff in a police station. It may be close-knit, eg all branch members live and work near each other, or it may have its members scattered across the UK eg workers in the voluntary sector for which a branch is formed around a particular employer such as Barnado's.

Unions rely on members working voluntarily at branch level. Each branch has a set structure eg a Branch Committee, a Branch Secretary, a Branch Treasurer, a Health & Safety Officer, a Women's Officer.

## Appendix 1: Unison lay structures

Service Group Conferences (annual)	National Delegate Conference (annual)	Self-organised Group Conferences (annual)
7 x Service Group Executives	National Executive Council (governs between National Delegate Conferences)	4 x National Committees of Self-organised Groups
Energy Health Care Local Government Police Staffs Education Water Transport		Black Members Disabled Members Lesbians and Gay Men Women Young Members

UNISON is committed to achieving proportionality and fair representation for women at all levels in the union. Proportionality means that women are represented on UNISON committees and bodies, at least in proportion to the percentage of women in the electorate for those bodies. It guarantees women a voice in the decision-making structures.

In the workplace, stewards act as a link between members and the branch. If members have a problem they want to discuss with the union, the steward is often the first person they turn to.


Stewards liaise regularly with employers to sort out difficulties before they become real problems; stewards are there to anticipate and prevent trouble rather than create it. Stewards also represent any member who is in negotiation or in dispute with an employer eg over an equal pay claim, a job share, or a disciplinary matter. Where necessary, stewards look for support from the local branch and from UNISON's regional and national officers. Stewards help UNISON's regional and national officers to stay in touch with what is happening 'on the ground'. This is vital for good policy making – the union leadership has to make sure that it leads only where members are prepared to follow.

## The challenge of change

A major change and challenge for trade unions in the past 20 years has been the privatisation programme. This has affected public sector workers in particular. Under **privatisation**, some **nationalised** industries and some aspects of what had been local government services were sold off or contracted out as separate entities. As a result, many employees found themselves working for a new and very different employer.

So, for example, members who had been working for a nationalised British electricity undertaking found themselves employed by a French-owned multinational company that had bought the business. Similarly, people who had been employed by a local council as, say, refuse collectors found themselves working for a private employer, and facing the prospect of a new **contract of employment** and revised conditions of service.

In such situations, a union like UNISON is greatly needed.



Service Groups	%	Members
Health Care	27.5	337,500
Higher Education	4.7	57,500
Local Government (and other education)	54.6	670,000
Utilities	2.7	33,000
Voluntary Sector	1.6	20,000
Other	7.8	96,000
(ie transport, private companies; nursing homes; police staff)		

Figures exclude retired members



The change of ownership from public to private can lead to big changes in approach as to how an enterprise is run. Private businesses pursue profit, and look for opportunities to save money by cutting costs. One of UNISON's key jobs has been to try to make sure that the new employers respect and honour employees' existing pay and conditions eg holiday entitlement, pension rights, maternity leave. This can be hard going.

If terms and conditions are to be re-negotiated, the union will handle the business on behalf of all affected members so as to ensure that its members' rights at work are upheld. Employment rights legislation can be full of legal terminology and open to misinterpretation. UNISON is able to provide its members with free expert help and advice.

Some private sector employers are less approachable and less willing to find common ground than others. With profits and shareholders in mind, they can be tempted to look for ways to cut earnings; lengthen working hours, shed jobs; abandon pension and sickness benefits; lower safety standards to the legal minimum etc. Trade unions such as UNISON encourage employers to resist such a temptation.

When 'public services' were run almost exclusively by the public sector (eg local council or local health authority or a nationalised industry such as British Rail), they were seen as essential services to be paid for, through taxation, and as something to which every citizen was entitled to eg access to a doctor and to a good water supply. The government was responsible to Parliament for ensuring that services were offered efficiently and in line with agreed plans.

For public service workers, matters such as pay and conditions of service were negotiated centrally through a process called 'collective bargaining'. The resulting agreement was then operated nationally; all workers doing the same job across the UK were covered by it.

In the private sector, there tends to be less enthusiasm for collective bargaining and for national agreements. Some hospitals and some schools, for example, are keen to move to negotiating pay and conditions at regional level, and even at 'workplace level'.

In some private firms, the employer looks to negotiate with individual employees and may even want an employee to agree not to divulge to any other employee the terms of his/her own employment. Many such firms are not keen to give official recognition to any trade union, leaving employees vulnerable.

Many women in particular prefer to work part-time during at least some stage of their working lives. In recent years, trade unions have pressed governments into improving the rights of part-time workers. Many women union members have benefited.

Considerable progress has been made in many other areas of particular importance to women, including:

- equal pay for equal work
- equal opportunities for promotion
- socially acceptable working hours
- flexitime
- job sharing
- maternity leave as a right rather than a privilege.

The concerns of UNISON's three quarters of a million women members are at the heart of the union. Through negotiation and legal cases where necessary, UNISON has won millions of pounds in improved pay and conditions for thousands of women workers — on issues such as equality for part-time workers and combating sexual harassment.

Unions still have a big job to do and they are not dying out.

Overall union membership has indeed dropped from the 13 million achieved in the 1960s and 70s, but in recent years it has been slowly rising. Currently, it is just over 7 million.

In the past 3 years, the proportion of people eligible to join UNISON who have chosen to be UNISON members has increased each year.

The election of a Labour government in 1997 certainly gave trade unionism a boost. The Employment Relations Act 1999 gave unions the

legal right to seek 'recognition.' It permits unions to negotiate with an employer about holding a ballot among the employer's workforce.

This ballot would give workers the opportunity to vote in favour of naming a union to represent them in their pay negotiations with the employer and in other activities. This Act prompted many employers to make voluntary agreements with UNISON and other unions rather than wait for a union to use the legislation; unions came back in from the cold.

It has been no surprise to longstanding union members to learn the outcome of a study, conducted in 1999 by Professor David Metcalf from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP). This shows that workers in unionised workplaces are far better off than those in non-unionised workplaces and that this is particularly true for women.

He concludes that:

- unions are agents of greater equality – economic, sexual and racial.
- In unionised workplaces:
- pay differentials are reduced
  - income differentials between men and women, black and white workers, healthy staff and those with health problems are noticeably smaller than in non-unionised workplaces.

The CEP study also shows that in workplaces where unions are active:

- women get more time off: 50 per cent of workplaces that recognise unions allow employees to take parental leave and have job sharing schemes, with 7 per cent having a workplace nursery or a nursery linked with the workplace
- women can switch more easily between full-time and part-time work: 64 per cent of workplaces that recognise trade unions entitle their workers to switch from full-time to part-time employment as opposed to 42 per cent of companies that do not recognise unions.

Trade unions have certainly helped win these entitlements.



Trade unions still face challenges, not least from the **dot.com revolution** and the growth of call centres, dubbed the 'new sweatshops.' Increasing numbers of UNISON members work in call centres, the majority of whose employees are female and under 25. The trade union record on attracting young members is poor; currently only 18 per cent of young workers (aged 18 to 29) are union members.

Every year, many young people join the job market either from school, college or university. It is the job of trade unions such as UNISON to persuade them and other young workers that becoming a union member brings them enormous advantages in the workplace.

Unions also have to convince more employers that a union in the workplace brings advantages in terms of increased efficiency and profits without recourse to exploiting employees. A contented workforce is not only healthier but also better motivated, more reliable and more productive.

## GLOSSARY

### Contract of employment:

Legal agreement between an employer and employee established within 13 weeks of an employee starting a new job. The contract includes job title, hours of work, pay rate and method of payment.

### Dot.com revolution:

Development of the new economy based upon e-businesses.

### Legislation:

Acts of Parliament that create laws.

### Nationalised:

Firms and industries owned, controlled and financed by the state.

### Privatisation:

The transfer of ownership from the state to private ownership.

For further information about UNISON please browse:

**www.unison.org.uk**

