Employment Relations Comment

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Tackling Climate Change – A new role for trade unions in the workplace?

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In September 2011, we published a paper entitled 'What role for trade unions in future workplace relations?' The paper, written by Chris F Wright of Cambridge University, was part of the Acas Future of Workplace Relations Discussion Paper Series. The following article was written in response to that paper by Sarah Pearce, Assistant National Officer at Unison, seconded to the TUC for three years as its GreenWorkplaces project leader. It contributes to the debate that Acas is currently keen to promote around what the future decade holds for employment relations in Britain.

In a recent Acas discussion paper Chris Wright[1], Research Fellow in the Faculty of Economics at Cambridge, examined the future role of trade unions in workplace relations. The paper highlighted how union strategies have evolved in response to a rapidly changing workplace environment. The author rightly argues that if unions are going to respond and adapt to the challenges they face and strengthen their influence on workplace relations, they must broaden their appeal.

This article outlines a further area of union organising that can build positive workplace relations and yet is too often overlooked: the contribution trade unions are making to tackling climate change, and many unions are now rising to the challenge. Improving business efficiency and building positive workplace relations through union "greenworkplace" projects is an expanding area of union influence.

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Building on the success of a series of earlier pilot projects[2], the TUC gained funding in 2008 via the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF), for a two-year GreenWorkplaces project to coordinate individual GreenWorkplace projects. These local projects are union-led, democratic and workplace-based initiatives that encourage and support the practical engagement of both workers and management around shared green objectives, essentially to secure energy savings and reduce the environmental impact of the workplace. The more mature projects lead to the creation of workplace environmental committees with agreements that embed workforce engagement on environmental sustainability into the way organisations work. A new union role has developed to take on the challenge of negotiating on environmental issues, the union environmental or "green" rep. Crucially, these new union representatives have made significant progress in developing a green agenda across a wide range of workplaces, even though they currently have no statutory rights to time off for training or to carry out their role.

This article examines why climate change is now a trade union issue, provides an overview of recent union developments around tackling environmental issues at work, the strategies unions are using to push climate change up the workplace negotiating agenda and its impact on workplace relations.

Why is climate change a trade union issue?

As concern about climate change and the environment has risen up the political and industrial agenda in recent years, unions have faced mounting pressure to develop an effective response to the scale of the challenge.

With workplaces accounting for a fifth of UK carbon emissions[3], efforts to reduce the environmental impact of the workplace are crucial to limiting the impact of climate change. Given the strategic importance of energy and resource efficiency in the UK's energy and climate change objectives, building employee engagement in climate change and energy issues at work is crucial. Furthermore, unions need to be seen as modern and relevant organisations that deal with the big issues of the day, so greening the workplace is a strategic priority in terms of union renewal.

Greenworkplaces are a fundamental part of an international trade union strategy for a "just transition", that seeks to ensure a shift towards a low carbon economy that is fair and equitable for all. Quite apart from issues of solidarity with fellow workers around the globe, climate change will affect us all and changes to working life are inevitable.

Why climate change is a trade union issue

- Union research consistently shows that union members are concerned about climate change and want their union to be active on environmental issues.[4]
- Making workplaces sustainable saves money and jobs.
- Working practices may need to adapt to cope with more frequent experience of higher temperatures. Changes to dress codes, uniforms, equipment, shift patterns and breaks may be necessary and need renegotiating.
- Changes in working procedures need to be assessed for their environmental impact. Union green reps can identify any concerns at odds with other employee interests and ensure change is fairly negotiated.
- Negotiations on environmental and energy issues help unions anticipate organisational change, pressures and priorities, ensuring compliance with regulations and potentially avoiding financial penalties.
- Cost savings can be fed into staff bonus schemes or ring-fenced for investment in environmental improvements.
- Environmental improvements can make workplaces healthier, safer, less stressful and more comfortable places to work by maximising natural daylight, improving heating and ventilation controls and air quality.
- Union involvement in the environmental agenda can bring new members and reps into the union, attracting a more diverse membership.

GreenWorkplaces and the modernisation agenda

The GreenWorkplaces pilot projects, supported by on-site TUC training workshops, helped build awareness and typically led onto joint management and union consultations around emerging issues at workplace level. They sought to challenge what corporate decisions were being taken and, crucially, the way “green decisions” were being made at work, in a constructive way. For example, at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, in London, the project set up a joint union-management environment committee, with reasonable time off granted for union reps and members to conduct official committee business, a hospital-wide programme of environmental audits and organise campaigns and events.

Impact on workplace relations

Each pilot project was established upon a principle of cooperation between management and unions, and this enabled a range of initiatives around resource saving and energy reduction to take place. The safe learning environment created through the participatory approach of trade union educational methods, laid the foundations for meaningful joint working and generated genuine and frank evaluations on the strengths and weaknesses of environmental management practices. This allowed options for improving environmental performance to be jointly identified. At National Museums Liverpool, management agreed to the set up of a joint management/union/staff environmental committee within only two months of the training workshop.

For many union reps, staff and managers attending GreenWorkplace project events and training workshops, considering climate change as a core trade union issue was new territory. The fact that unions managed to progress projects in the context of a recession, budget cuts and job losses also provides an insight into the potential for these projects to sustain dialogue within the workplace at times when industrial relations are potentially strained.

Discussions on largely non-adversarial topics, such as energy efficiency, offered an opportunity to maintain lines of communication on all sides. The business advice and consultancy firm Croner, specialising in “best practice in the areas of human resources, health and safety and environmental management”, commented in June 2009 how the project at Great Ormond Street Hospital “will unite trade unions and hospital management in a bid to make the hospital even more environmentally aware”[5].

Projects broke down cultural barriers between management and staff. Technical environmental managers gained an appreciation of trade union skills in influence and persuasion, recognising the potential for unions to encourage employee participation and give environmental policy credibility among frontline staff. Meanwhile, union reps gained an understanding of technical issues, such as the relationship between energy production and CO_2. One workshop participant at Leicester City Council commented in their course evaluation that it was “refreshing to hear managers and staff agree.”[6]

The MacLeod report[7], 2009, acknowledges that ‘employee voice’ is a key enabler in increasing employee engagement and thereby improving business performance. ‘Employee voice’ is defined as: “Employees’ views are sought out; they are listened to and [employees can] see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate.” However, union GreenWorkplace projects, demonstrate the added value to be gained when employees are empowered, not just to suggest, but to take the lead on new initiatives. At Magor Brewery, in Wales, for instance, an energy saving project initiated and driven by the union Unite has, with the support of management, led to a 40% reduction in carbon emissions in just two years, saving a staggering £2 million in costs.[8]

Building a Network of Greenworkplaces

Recognising the potential to engage a broader, more diverse range of employees in environmental workplace activity, the TUC set up the first national online network for union environmental reps in 2010, with the support of a one-year grant from the Department for Food and Rural Affairs. The online network includes an e-newsletter, training materials, case studies and resources to support workplace negotiations and campaigns. It encourages reps to network with one another and with non-union environmental activists who are encouraged to register.

Interest in the new online network has expanded overseas with trade unionists from Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Norway, and the United States registering to gain access to the site's resources.

Union reps and employers alike have found the network's resources of value. The environmental manager, at the Port of Felixstowe, Alan Tinline recently commented "I really appreciate the help in trying to find new ways to get everyone involved and create a workplace where everyone feels they can play a part. Getting the trade union on board is critical to this and with your support I think we can move forward"[9].

Building Alliances

Trade unions are also recognising the need to join forces with civil society in a joint call for green and decent jobs with "Alliances for a Green Recovery" being the subject of the 2010 TUC Climate Change Conference. Union representatives also participated in this year's Green and Decent Jobs Learning Exchange Programme to the US organised by the Institute for Public Policy and Research. The exchange explored the most effective methods for building alliances between unions, civil society, environmental organisations and employers to build the policies, investment and partnerships needed to drive the transition to a low carbon economy at a local level.

These forays into new territory are now beginning to bear fruit with alliances being set up in the UK. The Greener Jobs Alliance (GJA) launched in September this year and funded through the trading arm of Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Union Council aims to tackle the low carbon skills deficit by forming alliances between local authorities, trade unions, training providers, employers, housing associations and campaign groups to generate demand for low carbon jobs and training. The GJA is a partnership between the University and College Union (UCU), IPPR, the TUC, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace.[10]

The TUC's Unionlearn is also engaged in setting up "green apprenticeship partnerships" in low carbon construction, building retrofit, waste management and horticulture with partners in East London and Leicestershire and plans to extend these initiatives to other regions.

All of these developments point to a union movement which is recognising the urgent need to broaden its appeal and relevance to modern society.

Conclusion and recommendations

Union momentum around environmental issues has grown rapidly in recent years with over 1,300 union reps responding to a 2009 TUC survey[11], on environment and climate change. Unions reported a remarkable range of union-led initiatives to tackle energy and resource use, recycling and green travel in the workplace.

The survey uncovered 430 different joint management-union committee structures/working parties discussing climate-related issues at work, pointing to high levels of enthusiasm among union representatives to be involved in the environmental workplace agenda. The study found a wide range of awareness-raising and information events taking place, from “Question Time” panels with local industry leaders and environmental organisations; to “Greening at Home” sessions; film shows and sustainability weeks.

The range of innovative union-led projects emerging covers everything from training events on energy efficiency in theatre and performance venues, to sessions on how to power prisons using food waste, to the use of actors and theatre companies in the workplace to explore environmental issues[12]. The GreenWorkplaces Network site directs users to union projects involving carbon and environmental audits, recycling schemes and green travel plans, and to more unusual projects, such as the fire brigade union rep who successfully negotiated for condemned fire hose to be recycled into designer handbags and belts.

Research undertaken by the Carbon Trust shows that 87% of employees believe that it is important for them to help their employers cut costs and that 78% are willing to be more energy efficient. Yet over half of employees (55%) said that their employers had never given them advice on being more energy efficient around the workplace.[13]

Currently only 14% of union reps are granted time off to carry out environmental activities as part of their union duties[14]. In the absence of statutory rights for union environmental reps, convincing employers to allow union reps time off to attend union environmental training will pose a significant challenge to trade unions and will require intensive support to reps on the ground.

A recent study by the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)[15] examined best practice examples of social partner involvement in greening the economy in different member states. Eurofound’s study effectively demonstrates the potential for building a European network of GreenWorkplaces. The study found that TUC GreenWorkplace projects are “positively perceived, with many companies and employers taking part” and states that Governments should “provide incentives to social partners by making clear the benefits that can flow to both sides”.

Sarah Pearce, Assistant National Officer, Unison

1 What role for trade unions in future workplace relations?' Wright, C., Acas discussion paper series, Sept. 2011. http://www.acas.org.uk/future

2 Objectives and outcomes report. TUC GreenWorkplaces Project 2006-7, TUC publications, 2007.

3 DECC, 2009.

4 Unions and Climate Change, The case for union environmental reps, Labour Research Department (LRD), 2009; The Environment and Climate Change, – a guide for union reps, LRD, 2007; Do Trade Unions Really Care About the Environment, Prospect, September 2004.

5 Croner, UK Press Release, June 2009,

6 GreenWorks. The TUC GreenWorkplaces Project Report, 2008 – 2010, page 54.

7 "Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement", D. MacLeod and N. Clarke, July 2009.

8 See for example partnership plan for saving energy brings business benefits; Minister full of praise for brewery's pounds 2m saving, Chris Kelsey, The Free Library, 15 May 2010, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Partnership+plan+for+saving+energy+brings+business+benefits%3B+Minister...-a0226433886; and www.tuc.org.uk/greenworkplacesnetwork/Case_studies/Green_Workplaces_Network_Case_Study_Magor_Brewery.pdf;

9 GreenWorkplaces Network Project Report, TUC Publications, August 2011, http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/index.cfm?mins=87&minors=4&majorsubjectID=2

10 www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5269

11 Unions and climate change, Labour Research Department (LRD), 2009

12 South West TUC Green Workplaces Project, report and evaluation 2008 – 2011, TUC Publications, 2011.

13 "UK employees ready to help cut costs around the workplace", Carbon Trust press release, 27 March 2009.

14 Ibid, LRD, 2009

15 "Industrial relations and sustainability: the role of social partners in the transition towards a green economy", European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2011

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