

# UNION MODERNISATION FUND

**BIS** | Department for Business  
Innovation & Skills

**UNITE (T&G) DEVELOPING AND  
SUPPORTING WORKPLACE UNION  
EQUALITY REPRESENTATIVES –  
A BREAKTHROUGH FOR EQUALITY  
IN THE WORKPLACE**



# Developing and supporting workplace union equality representatives – a breakthrough for equality in the workplace

## Background

At present, most anti-discrimination law focuses on outlawing discrimination by providing redress after discrimination has occurred. Increasingly, however, employers and unions are recognising the importance of actively creating a working environment where discrimination is prevented, diversity is welcomed, and barriers to equality are identified and eliminated. This is important not just for recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, but also for preventing costly, time-consuming legal cases.

The role of union equality representatives is increasingly being identified as key to this process. Where they have been established and properly supported, they can promote best practice in equalities, and can also be a route towards a more inclusive workplace and union. As well as improving representation on equalities, this can open up new routes to activism among women, black, Asian and ethnic minority, disabled, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), and young members.

diversifying union membership and workforce, the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) project was seen as important in supporting the development of the union equality representative role and tackling under-representation, particularly of women and black, Asian and ethnic minorities, as workplace union reps.

In this project, the union set out to:

- produce a Union Equality Representatives' Toolkit
- pilot the toolkit through targeted seminars in key sectors/workplaces
- strengthen the role of union equality reps with union reps/officers and employers, developing model agreements, course materials and sustainable ongoing activities regionally and nationally
- promote the role of union equality reps in the union, the trade union movement and wider community by:
  - producing a union equality reps' newsletter
  - developing a database of union equality reps in the union
  - conducting surveys of union equality reps
  - holding a public launch of the toolkit
  - widely disseminating project findings at TUC/UMF and other events

## Why this project?

Over a number of years, the T&G, now part of UNITE the Union, has taken the first steps in establishing union equality representatives in a small number of workplaces. With a

## Methodology and outcomes

The project was run by a steering group, backed up with regular reports, monitoring and evaluation of clear outcomes, including sustainability and future developments. The union provided matched funding to the UMF monies, including employer funding support.

### Initial research

At the outset, a questionnaire about the aims of the project was widely circulated and discussed. The key points were reported and underpinned the next stage developments. Findings included:

- **Union equality reps need to be explained and promoted** – a newsletter would help with this process
- **Union equality reps can be drawn from a range of different situations, including:**
  - existing union equality reps who want to receive more coordinated support
  - existing shop stewards who agree to formally extend their role
  - existing women's reps, disability champions, black members' reps, young members' reps, LGBT reps, migrant workers' reps, harassment listening support network members, and women, race and equalities sector committee delegates, whose position is recognised as a union equality rep position
  - the establishment of new union equality reps in different workplaces
- **A number of key concerns should be addressed in developing the role of union equality rep, including:**
  - the establishment of union equality reps is not an alternative to shop stewards having training, alongside a strong commitment to advancing equality and representing members on equality issues

- the establishment of union equality reps is not an alternative to encouraging women, black members, young members, disabled members, and migrant workers to become shop stewards
- union equality reps must be diverse, including existing shop stewards and encouraging new and more diverse union reps

- **The Union Equality Reps' Toolkit should include:**

- basic information and links
- model facilities agreement and negotiating points
- equality audits
- how to identify key equality issues
- how to encourage and involve all
- practical information, including examples and templates

### Union equality reps survey

The next stage of the project was a survey of union equality reps. It included questions about the role these reps play, support they receive, their views on promoting equality, the ongoing support they require, and their comments on plans for the toolkit. The survey results were collated and informed the development of the next stages of the project and the toolkit, and were included in the presentation at the launch event.

The survey results showed that union equality reps are offering support on many important issues, the top five being:

- harassment and bullying
- family friendly and flexible working
- fair play and pensions
- discrimination in training and progression
- equality in health, safety and welfare

The survey also confirmed the range of roles in which union equality reps are operating:

- shop stewards (and other reps) who carry out action on equality – some have agreed paid facility time for equality as part of their shop steward's role, whereas others have not
- shop stewards (and other reps) who are also elected union equality reps – some have specific facility time for this role, whilst others do not
- union equality reps elected at the workplace who do not have another union role as well – some have agreed facility time, but most have not; a range of different union equality rep roles are included, such as union equality rep, women's rep, disability champion, black workers' or young workers' rep, LGBT rep, harassment listener

A great deal of concern was expressed in the survey that the role of promoting equality should be on a firmer and more secure footing industrially and legally. It was felt that equality should be included in union recognition rights and procedural agreements, and there should be statutory rights for union equality reps.

Almost all those who were also elected shop stewards said they had paid release time from the employer as a union equality rep, but only 21 per cent of those elected only as a union equality rep were able to do so. Further survey questions led to union equality reps' experience of what the lack of legal rights and agreed facilities means in practice to the advancement of equality at the workplace, with responses such as:

- "I have to take holidays."
- "I am not recognised as a union equality rep."
- "I have support at the moment but things can change."

The Project Manager, Diana Holland, Assistant General Secretary Equalities & Organising, Unite the Union (T&G section) explains:

*"The experience of the project is that strengthening the role of union equality reps required action in a number of key areas, including negotiations in the workplace between unions and employers to agree facilities for union equality representatives; union education for union equality reps as part of the accreditation process; awareness-raising of the role in the workplace and wider community; and legal underpinning by introducing statutory rights for union equality reps in the Equality Bill and the consequential follow-through to, for example, ACAS Codes of Practice and union recognition procedures."*

### The union equality reps' toolkit

After widespread consultation and discussion, the format and content of the toolkit were agreed, and the toolkit was designed, produced and launched.

**Key equality areas** identified through surveys, piloting, promotional and awareness activities, steering group and committee discussions as most important to be covered in the toolkit were:

- details of union equality reps' rights and a model workplace agreement
- dignity at work and dealing with harassment and bullying
- how to check equality at the workplace: fair pay and equality audits
- family rights and flexible working
- key issues for representation and involvement of:
  - women
  - black, Asian and ethnic minority workers
  - disabled workers
  - young workers

- LGBT workers
- older workers
- migrant and agency workers
- ex-offenders

**Format features pinpointed** as most important were that the toolkit should:

- be practical and straightforward
- include resources to use proactively in the workplace, such as leaflets, poster and checklists
- include a pocket handbook for reps to carry with them, to be used to encourage new reps
- be available electronically through a disk and developed as part of the union's website

The final toolkit includes these key equality areas and format features, along with a focus on accessibility.

### **Piloting the toolkit in workplaces/sectors**

As part of the UMF project, seminars were held to develop the role more widely. These were also an invaluable opportunity to test the toolkit and to develop the educational materials. Four workplace/sector seminars were held during the project at diverse workplaces:

- general/multi-industrial
- local government
- oil refinery
- bus industry

The seminars were crucial, as Diana Holland explains:

*“These seminars raised awareness of union equality reps, strengthened and developed the role in specific workplaces, and provided the opportunity to pilot and evaluate the toolkit. Seminars were developed with relevant union shop stewards, officers, employers, and the union's education and research departments. Each involved*

*existing union equality reps and those seeking to develop the role.”*

Participants in the seminars were diverse – men and women were involved of white and BAEM origins, disabled, LGBT, young and older members working in a range of industrial and service sectors, different jobs and geographical areas. The programme and materials covered key issues for union equality reps and the development of the toolkit, and were developed to be appropriate to each sector. In addition to the seminars with Ineos oil refinery, London Buses and a wide range of local councils, delegates came from all kinds of workplaces, from TNT Express to J Sainsbury, Devonport Royal Dockland, Latin American Workers' Association and South Yorkshire Police. Discussions were wide ranging, on topics such as disability discrimination, bullying, term-time working, capability procedure, language interpretation/translation, establishing the union equality rep position, equal and low pay, job evaluation, single status, equality impact assessments and audits, maternity and family rights, pensions, and other equality issues.

Union equality reps' courses, using the materials developed and the experiences of these seminars, continue both regionally and nationally now that the project has ended, with further employers (such as Ford, British Waterways and Associated British Ports, Remploy, Manpower, BAA, British Airways and Homebase) becoming involved.

### **The project launch**

The launch event was held in the Diskus Suite, London on 4 December 2007. Delegates included union equality reps from UNITE-T&G, UNITE-Amicus, the TUC, BERR, and a range of other unions and organisations.

The programme involved maximum participation and sharing experience from participants, as well as a range of speakers.

Brendan Barber, TUC General Secretary, said at the launch:

*“It is absolutely right to put equality at the heart of what the union does, and I commend you on this project, putting that commitment into practice... Just as Union Learning Reps mean that millions of members are treated with dignity and respect they would not otherwise get, this project gives the battle for equality the attention it deserves – we need union equality reps who are trained and supported to make that difference, and to put the role on a statutory footing.”*

Harriet Harman, Minister for Women and Secretary of State for Equalities, commended the union and the project for pushing the equality agenda, invited the union to participate in a future union equality reps event in the House of Commons, and said:

*“We must look at equality as a way of meeting public policy objectives, too – getting more disabled people and lone parents into work where they can be better off, tackling the ethnic employment gap and supporting parents to have enough time with their children, means helping them when they get a problem to stay in work, and the union has a very important role here... We will have an Equality Bill next year which must do more than just consolidation ... the case for union equality reps has been very strongly put. Now we will have to examine this case... We are not here for rhetoric. We are here to make a difference... I congratulate you all in T&G – Unite, and look forward to working with you in the future.”*

## **Raising awareness of union equality reps**

The role of union equality rep has been growing in importance in recent years. This was clearly recognised by the Women & Work Commission of employers, trade

unions, and other specialist representatives in its report, *Shaping a Fairer Future*:

*“A system of trade union equality reps is welcomed. These reps would provide a lens of equality across workplace practices, raise issues related to equality and diversity, tackle discrimination, resolve conflict and seek solutions with management alongside other union colleagues.”*

Diana Holland has welcomed the opportunity to be able to put the report's findings into practice:

*“The Government's support through the UMF to take forward the recommendations of the Women & Work Commission has been very important to raising awareness. The T&G (now part of Unite the union) has been very pleased to play its part in raising awareness of union equality reps as part of this project.”*

As well as the actions listed above, the union has raised awareness of union equality reps through:

- conference sessions specifically on union equality reps at all sector conferences
- committees and union executive quarterly reports and discussion
- union equality reps included as priority in guidance drawn up for officers on annual pay bargaining strategy
- union equality reps included as central part of equality training for organisers in building sustainable workplace organisation
- motions and speakers put forward on union equality representatives at TUC Women's, Black Workers, Disability, LGBT and Young Workers Conferences
- government consultations on the way forward for advancing equality, including on the Discrimination Law Review, Union Representatives, Work & Family, and follow up to the Women & Work Commission Recommendations

- major features on union equality reps in the Equal Opportunities Review and Labour Research magazines, developed from the project launch and toolkit
- UMF, BERR and TUC public events and fringe meetings were supported with experience from this project throughout its duration

## Conclusion and recommendations

The union met all its stated aims and objectives and concluded that, because of this project, the role union of equality reps has been considerably strengthened through:

- raising awareness of the role in the union and more widely
- encouraging more union equality reps and their diversity
- developing a toolkit and union education materials, piloted at workplace seminars
- national and regional data bases of union equality reps
- survey of union equality reps
- strengthening communication with union equality reps

Diana Holland concluded:

*“During the project, we identified union equality reps as the ‘missing link’ in the development and promotion of equality in the workplace. What’s more, the project had shown how important union equality reps are in the workplace, while supporting their development and effectiveness, raising their profile and disseminating experiences across the trade union movement and interested organisations and journals. From this experience, we have reached three clear conclusions – that union equality reps are a breakthrough for equality in the workplace; that trade union education and training using the toolkit are vital to ensuring the effectiveness of union equality reps; and that the lack of facility time and statutory rights*

*is clearly a barrier to further development of this important role in many areas at this time.”*

The union, therefore, wants the role of union equality rep to be recognised as ‘a breakthrough for equality’, an important part of the union team at the workplace, and placed on a statutory footing, and would like to see the following recommendations taken forward:

- A higher priority to negotiations in the workplace between unions and employers to agree facilities for union equality representatives
- Union education for union equality reps established and agreed as part of the accreditation process
- Continuing dissemination of the experience of this project as part of awareness raising and strengthening of the role of union equality reps in the workplace and wider community
- The experiences of this project to be fed into the developments on the Equality Bill and follow-up to the recommendations of the Women & Work Commission, in relation to unions and employers supporting equality reps, the development of exemplar employers, capacity building and the placing of union equality reps on a statutory footing to ensure paid time off for duties and activities and for training
- The union strongly welcomed the first ever conference of union equality reps organised jointly by the Government Equalities Office and BERR in June 2008, in which union equality reps involved in this project took part.

**For more information on this project, please contact:**

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