



# Workplace Learning: Who Controls the Agenda?

A Conference for Union Learning  
Representatives

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Conference Report

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## **Workplace Learning: Who Controls the Agenda?** *Conference Report*

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## **Introduction**

This report arises from a conference organised by the Working Lives Research Institute (WLRI) in partnership with five trade unions (Amicus, the CWU, the GPMU, the T&G and Unifi) and the TUC. The conference was part of a research project exploring the impact of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) on trade unions; the characteristics of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and their experiences in the workplace. More than 100 delegates participated in the conference including ULRs, union officers, academics and representatives from the Learning and Skills Council and the Department for Education and Skills.

The report includes contributions from speakers and reports from workshop discussions. It also presents initial findings from the research project, drawing on data gathered through two national surveys – one of union officers with national responsibilities for union learning and the other of ULRs.



## Extract from Tony Dubbins' speech

'Welcome to this very important conference. Its important, not just because of the research that has been undertaken by the Working Lives Research Institute, but also because it has brought together so many Union Learning Reps from a variety of different trade unions.

Eighteen months of statutory recognition and the 7,000 Union Learning Reps in the movement are already making a huge impact in improving the skills of thousands of workers – and improving the level of Trade Union Organisation.

Union Learning Reps are helping workers who have been denied any training at work because their employers still have the mindset of mill owners, and others because they just wanted to learn something new. The fact that so much has been achieved in so little time, is remarkable, and is a reflection of the importance the union movement in this country places upon the skills agenda.

Digby Jones from the CBI remarked in the summer that trade unions were irrelevant. Well Digby, I think this agenda more than any other, proves you wrong. Perhaps if the CBI put as much effort into encouraging their members to train, as they do in criticising the union movement, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

Union Learning Reps really are key to the role of trade unions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The great work Learning Reps have already done just illustrates how far we have come in such a short time. We have trade union learning centres right across the country - in workplaces so that workers can learn new skills. Union Learning Reps are working with employers to ensure that everyone gets access to training, not just those workers who already have qualifications. They are highlighting skill needs in the workplace and working with their employer to tackle the problem.

This is trade unionism at its finest – directly improving the lives of working people. And its nice to see that we do not just have to prevent bad things happening in the workplace - things like redundancies, dismissals and discrimination. The training and learning agenda is seen as something positive. But we still have so much more to do.

Health and Safety Reps, of which there are 150,000 are fully incorporated into union rulebooks, workplace committees, and are respected by employers across the country as a well-placed source of advice for health and safety matters. Our challenge is to get to where Health and Safety Reps are now.

It does take time, and this agenda is still relatively new. But the complete integration into the union of the Learning Rep must be achieved if we are to enjoy the very real benefits these activists can bring unions and their members.



We need to make sure that Union Learning Reps are taken seriously, that they are afforded good quality training and are also afforded the respect and support by their union that they all deserve. And it is this, the debate about where we want to be in 10 years time, which is what I personally hope we will begin today. Union policy needs to be shaped and influenced by the research undertaken by the Working Lives Research Institute, and you will all need to play an active part in this process, in your individual unions.

It is only by doing this that we can maximise the role of the ULR and its impact within the workplace - both in terms of affording workers new opportunities and in promoting trade unionism at work and building our movement. Because although the role of the Union Learning Rep in many ways, is a new role, a new agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it is also a traditional role. Let us not forget that unions were formed, partly out of the desire of working people to improve their skills, as well as protect their terms and conditions.

But whatever the agenda, where we create activity, workers gain strength. And where workers gain strength they can change and improve their working lives, and that of their families and communities.

And lets not get too anxious if we don't get what we want straight away. The skills agenda has been fast tracked over the last few years. Since 1997, we have had money from the Union Learning Fund, legislative support for Union Learning Reps, and support from Government from within the Learning and Skills Council. We may not agree with everything the Government has done – sometimes far from it, but on the skills agenda they have done more than any other Government in recent times.

There is, however, still much more to do. Trade Unions are entitled to seats on all 47 of the Learning and Skills Councils. And we need to ensure that union members who hold these seats are supported in this role by their union to deliver real benefits for their members. The trade union members on Sector Skills Councils, of which there are now 19, will require support from their union to ensure that they are adequately knowledgeable, so that they can deliver the union agenda within their sector.

As Union Learning Reps, you need to make the case for support of this kind from your union. You need to ask for advice and information from your union, and feed back your views, so you can ensure that workers in your sector get the greatest benefits from these bodies. And you need to drive forward this agenda in your workplace in terms of training and learning, but also in terms of organising and building strength among workers in your workplace.

Because, let us not forget, at the end of the day we are all trade union activists. And there is a clear, demonstrable and proven link between learning and organising. With all the talk of partnership in the learning and skills area, it is sometimes difficult to see these issues in the context of industrial relations.



When a colleague at work gets a qualification or a new skill it is easy to see this in isolation – as a personal issue. But we mustn't forget that training and learning are collective issues, on which we need to be able to bargain collectively. We need to continue to press employers to recognise them as such. Within the workplace we all need to think about training and learning in this way.

It is fair to say that on many areas of training and learning within the workplace, what employer's want and what workers want overlap. However, there are areas in which we do not share objectives, and Learning Reps should not be afraid to say so when this is the case. After all Union Learning Reps are not neutral agents in the workplace or an extension of the employer's training department. And as union activists they have an important role in recruiting workers into a trade union.

In the GPM section of Amicus we have seen the improvements in workplace organisation that training and learning can bring. We have organised around basic skills and apprenticeships - so we know it can be done.

Colleagues, we need to go away from this conference today and push our own respective unions to do the following:

- Make sure ULRs are in their union rule book
- Stretch employers to include bargaining rights on training as part of all recognition deals
- Ensure your union provides you with adequate resources and support for your role
- Make sure that your voice is heard, not just in your workplace, but in your own union.
- Make sure that you are seen as a union activist within your workplace, not as an assistant to your employer's training department

I would like to thank all of you for coming here today and giving up your Saturday. The good turnout today, demonstrates how passionately union members think about the skills agenda and what it can offer all workers.

I would urge everyone to participate fully in the workshops later today, and let us ensure that we continue to address the skill needs of workers, but that we also stretch ourselves in terms of organising within the workplace, and increasing union activity through learning.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference'.

**Tony Dubbins, Joint Deputy General Secretary,  
Amicus  
27 November 2004**

## **Keith Forrester, University of Leeds** **'Trade Unions and Learning in a Global Economy'**

This presentation addressed the challenges for trade unions, and union education in particular, in a global economy. There are significant changes taking place at global level and trade unions find change difficult to cope with.

In the context of globalization, capital is free from constraints of the nation state, but labour is not. Global economics drive the rationalisation for the lifelong learning agenda, not the emancipation of labour. The key term is employability. This agenda:

- shifts responsibility for learning from the state to the individual;
- attempts to narrow the scope and range of learning
- emphasises quantifiable outcomes and
- treats people as human capital.

Union's are about more than what happens at work. We must:

- follow our own agenda, not the employer's
- have strategies for the future and rethink what trade unions are about in order to engage workers
- take account of the organising implications of lifelong learning
- ensure union education reflects wider changes in society
- build links beyond the workplace with community and other groups campaigning on similar issues.

## **Judith Swift, National Development Worker,** **TUC Learning Services**

Judith's presentation focused on the history and development of the ULR role, as well as recent developments with the Union Learning Fund.

ULRs work to:

- engage and support learners
- work with providers to ensure delivery is contextualised and flexible
- explain the benefits of learning to employers and make relevant agreements.

Recent ULF evaluations have shown an increase in the number of learning agreements by 51.6% and 50% of ULRs report an improvement in the "learning culture" at work.

There is an overwhelming interest from learners in Skills for Life and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) courses.

Challenges for trade unions include:

- ensuring that ULRs can respond to the aims and aspirations of their membership and build in equality
- working to deliver learning that is stimulating, flexible and relevant.

# The Union Learning Experience: National Surveys of Union Officers and ULRs Summary of Initial Findings, November 2004

This report summarises initial findings from a Working Lives Research Institute (WLRI) project exploring the impact of the Union Learning Fund (ULF) on trade unions; the characteristics of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) and their experiences in the workplace. It draws on data gathered through two surveys – one of 25 national union officers with responsibilities for union learning and the other of 304 ULRs from five unions (Amicus, the CWU, the GPMU, the T&G and Unifi).

## The National Officer Survey

- In most unions the ULF is associated with the development of trade union policies and strategies on lifelong learning. Unions that had received ULF funds were more likely to have such policies or strategies in place than those that hadn't and such policies were more likely to focus on a broad commitment to lifelong learning and the ULR role. There are, however, some unions that have received funding which have no policies in place, suggesting a more *ad hoc* approach.
- Nearly two thirds of unions have structures or committees at national level responsible for lifelong learning. At regional level approaches are generally more informal and *ad hoc*.
- Only a minority (under a quarter) of unions have permanent dedicated officers with exclusive responsibility for union learning. Union employees working on learning projects tend to be in fixed-term, temporary posts linked to ULF projects.

*'We've always been committed to the training agenda. Once the Union Learning Fund was initiated we've obviously linked that into learning so it's training and learning now'*

National Officer

*'We couldn't do it without the funding. There's no way we'd pursue the sort of training partnerships and direct delivery without it'*

National Officer

## ULRs

- Most unions appear to be taking a pragmatic approach to the recruitment of ULRs. Although most are keen to attract new activists to the role many officers recognised that this was not always possible. There was no general agreement on whether ULRs should be elected or appointed. Many unions said this would be decided by the workplace or branch rather than by the national union.
- There are generally no clear policies on the formal integration of ULRs into unions; some unions formally recognise the ULR role in their rulebook or constitution, but others consider existing rules to be flexible enough to accommodate a new category of representative. Although there were cases where rules could be narrowly interpreted to effectively exclude ULRs from the policy making structures of the union, most national officers felt that ULRs enjoyed equal rights with other types of representative and were integrated into the union.

## Organising and Collective Bargaining

- There was a consensus amongst national officer respondents about the potential of lifelong learning in terms of promoting union recruitment, retention and organisation. Union learning is perceived as strategically important, providing a positive agenda for unions to organise around. Nevertheless, a

*'At this moment in time it's open to any member. What we would like is to attract newer people into being trade union activists and so far, our profile of union learning reps is that they are all non-traditional trade union members. So they are mostly women from black and minority ethnic groups'*

National Officer

*'We've had a few instances where we've negotiated learning agreements with companies and that's actually led to increased membership. Where people have seen that the union is doing something positive that can actually help their careers, that has had some positive spin-offs'*

National Officer

number of officers stated that this view was not necessarily fully shared across the union, with some referring to scepticism within their organisation. Many were also conscious of a lack of 'evidence' to support the notion that learning has a positive impact on recruitment.

- Although most unions are developing support structures and networks to support integration of union learning into the mainstream of union activity, a number of officers raised concerns about the extent to which lifelong learning is currently embedded within the wider organisation. Unions are endeavouring to integrate lifelong learning into the wider union but may sometimes be hampered by the workload of other officers as well as by the structure and culture of unions. Some respondents identified resistance or ambivalence to the learning agenda in parts of the union. An important function of the ULF is considered to be its potential to support education and briefing events and the development of materials and resources to support this process.

- The links between union learning and the bargaining agenda seem to be more tenuous and underdeveloped. Officers reported a reluctance (rather than hostility) across their unions to seek to include learning in standard collective bargaining. This may reflect the fact that training has not always been considered a collective bargaining issue.

*'We are putting a lot of effort into it, to train the reps and not leave them working in limbo, so that they give up and aren't really tied into the union. So there is a lot of effort being put in at regional level to embed this whole agenda in branches; the whole issue is being promoted very widely at regional, local and national level'*

National Officer

*'We found it very difficult to (get) people responsible for bargaining around one table because their agenda is so full, they have their priorities set by the National Executive Committee which we don't have any influence over'.*

National Officer

## Learning Agreements

- The conclusion of learning agreements with employers is generally seen as the responsibility of negotiating officers, or in some cases of project workers. Thus most of the officers interviewed did not have access to information about learning agreements and many unions did not have the resources to systematically collect records about them centrally.
- There are varying definitions of what a learning agreement is, although some unions had drafted model agreements. A number of respondents were aware of employer resistance to learning agreements. Some also mentioned the lack of confidence of ULRs as another possible barrier to the negotiation of learning agreements, but this was thought to be something that would change over time with training and support.

## Statutory Rights

- The statutory framework allowing time-off for ULRs is recognised as an important context for discussions with employers. However, some unions had deliberately avoided pushing such rights with employers, emphasising the development of partnership.

## The Survey of Union Learning Representatives

- The majority of ULRs are male, with under a quarter female and a relatively low proportion (five per

*'In terms of how well the learning agenda has been embedded within the union, we have a way to go. And in fact we're at the phase where embedding is the key task. It would be a minority of officials that would be involved in the lifelong learning agenda proactively. We have examples of recruiting and organising officers using lifelong learning, we've examples of lay reps using lifelong learning, we've examples of negotiating officers spontaneously going off and negotiating projects, but that's a minority.'*

National Officer

cent) described their ethnic background as Black. The average age of respondents was 43 with fewer than one in ten (nine per cent) of ULRs under 35.

- Most ULRs are long standing union members with nearly three quarters (70 per cent) in membership for over ten years. Only a very small proportion of respondents (six per cent) had joined more recently (under three years).

### **Becoming a ULR**

- ULRs have generally been in post for less than two years (60 per cent), but a quarter (25 per cent) said they had been a ULR for between two and four years.
- Very few (four per cent) ULRs are elected, over half (59 per cent) said they had volunteered for the role and over a third had been asked, nominated or appointed.
- As might be expected, most workers come to union learning through the union itself. The most popular reasons for becoming a ULR were 'I was involved in the union and thought education was important' (50 per cent) and 'I was asked by a union officer' (25 per cent). In contrast, the least popular option was 'I was asked by management' (five per cent).
- The main motivating factor for becoming a ULR is a commitment to education in its wider sense. The reason given by most respondents, whether they were already active in the union or not,

*'I wanted equality in training and education'* ULR

*'It is an opportunity to help others realise their potential.'*  
ULR

*'I just wanted to know more about the union.'* ULR

was an interest in education or a belief that education was important (50 per cent and 15 per cent respectively). Around a third (32 per cent) were motivated by the opportunity for 'personal development', but only one in ten cited 'career development' suggesting that for ULRs at least, engagement with union learning is not just about employability.

### New Activists

- On the whole ULRs are largely existing union activists - over three quarters (77 per cent) of respondents, held another position in the union or had done so. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) had not held another union position and were thus 'new activists'.
- Just under one in five (16 per cent) respondents say that one of the reasons they had become a ULR was to get more involved in the union. A similar proportion who were not formerly involved in the union became a ULR because of their interest in education. This suggests union learning is attracting new activists, although these are not necessarily new members.
- The characteristics of the new activists are distinctive. They are more likely to be female (38 per cent compared to 20 per cent of existing activists) and more likely to be black or minority ethnic (six per cent compared to three per cent for those holding other positions). They are also younger; 16 per cent were between 25 and 34 compared to six per cent of existing activists. They were also

What describes best why you became a ULR*?	
Number (%)	
I was asked by a union officer	75 (24.7)
I was a union learner and wanted to encourage others	37 (12.2)
I was not involved in the union but was interested in education	45 (14.8)
I was involved in the union and thought education was important	153 (50.3)
I was asked by management	14 (4.6)
Personal Development	96 (31.6)
Career Development	31 (10.2)
I wanted to get more involved in the union	49 (16.2)
Other	27 (8.9)
Missing	9 (3.0)
Total	304 (100)

\*Respondents could choose up to three



less likely to be longstanding union members (median membership for new activists was nine years compared to 21 years for existing activists). This reinforces previous research suggesting that union learning may be attracting a new group of activists to the union movement. Most new activists said the reason they had become ULRs was that they were not involved in the union but were interested in education (55 per cent).

### **Learning and Organising**

- The survey points to wider benefits of union learning and the potential for unions to extend organisation in the workplace. A substantial proportion of ULRs did not see their role as confined to union members; just under half (45 per cent) said that their ULR activities covered employees who were not union members.
- ULRs see a link between union learning and union organisation. The majority of respondents (71 per cent) said that they had tried to encourage people to join the union in their capacity as a ULR. Where they had done so, nearly a third (30 per cent) thought that membership had increased as a result of union learning. However, the potential for union learning to increase membership may not have been fully realised because most ULRs represented work groups with already high proportions in union membership.

*'I read a report from the TUC and decided to activate this in my workplace.'* ULR

*'I wanted to pay back the union movement – it helped me through education in the past.'* ULR



## Integration

- Most ULRs are integrated into the wider union; a half (50 per cent) had reported back on their activities to their union branch or works committee and nearly eight out of ten had attended at least one workplace union meeting in the past 12 months. The integration of ULRs into the wider union has not emerged as a major issue because in most cases they were existing activists.
- However, new activists who were ULRs but held no other union positions, were less likely to take part in other union activities. Of this group under half (45 per cent) attended union workplace meetings compared to nearly nine out of ten (87 per cent) of those with other positions. While activism develops over time and with confidence, there may be a concern that under half of new activists had never attended a union workplace meeting.

## Union Membership

- Over a third (38 per cent) of ULRs appear to be politically committed but just under another third (30 per cent) were union activists with no overt political commitment. Unsurprisingly, new activists were more likely to describe themselves as active on learning but not involved in other aspects of the union (64 per cent) and were far less likely to be motivated by political commitment – under one in ten (six per cent were) compared to just under half (47 per cent) of those who had other positions within the union.



*'I think its quite an intensive role really when done properly, and I think if you are an existing branch secretary the branch secretary work tends to be given up and we don't want that. We want more people involved, rather than people doing other things. If they can combine some learning work or support of learning or part of a learning reps role then that's fine, but if its replacement of mainstream union activity then I think that's detrimental'*  
National Officer

- The most popular reasons for ULRs joining the union in the first place were 'to help get better pay and conditions' (70 per cent) and 'a belief in trade unionism' (68 per cent). One third (33 per cent) cited access to training/education and the same proportion to secure equal opportunities at work. A smaller proportion cited union services such as legal advice (25 per cent) or financial services (four per cent), although over half (54 per cent) said one reason why they joined was as 'insurance should a problem arise at work'. New activists were far less likely than existing activists to have joined because of a belief in trade unionism (36 per cent compared to 77 per cent) or to help get better pay and conditions (51 per cent compared to 76 per cent).

### Training

- More than nine out of ten respondents (94 per cent) reported that they had been trained for their role as a ULR. Just under half (47 per cent) of those who had received the basic ULR training had done no other training and just over half (53 per cent) had gone on to further training, although this appears to be linked with the length of time in post (median 14 months compared to 24 months).
- Most ULRs felt that residential courses were the most effective way of delivering ULR training (42 per cent), closely followed by day release (40 per cent) – distance learning or internet learning were not popular.

<b>Which of the following most closely represents your attitude now towards your union?</b>	
	<b>%</b>
I am not currently active in the union	5.3
I am active on learning but don't get involved in other aspects of the union	24.3
I am active but not interested in the political aspects of the union	30.3
I am active and see the union as an extension of my political beliefs	37.8
Missing	2.3
Total	100

## Time-Off

- Despite the statutory right to time-off for ULR activities more than one in ten (12 per cent) report that they have had difficulties securing paid time-off to attend ULR training. ULRs are even more likely to have problems securing paid time-off for other activities, with a quarter doing so.
- Despite these difficulties about paid time-off almost 90 per cent of ULRs said they were 'quite aware' or 'very aware' of their statutory rights to paid time-off. Less than one in ten (8.5 per cent) felt they were not.
- The vast majority of ULRs carry out union learning activities in their own time; only one in five said they did not. Over one in ten (15 per cent) spent five or more hours a week.

## Union Support

- Despite being trained a substantial proportion of respondents feel that they are not adequately equipped to do the job of a ULR. This was more likely to be the case for those who had received basic ULR training only (40 per cent) than those who had received further training (24 per cent).
- Nearly half of the respondents to the survey are not entirely convinced that their union is doing a good job of supporting ULRs. While 55 per cent felt the union was doing a very good or good job, one quarter (26 per cent)

<b>Have you experienced any difficulties in securing paid time-off for training?</b>	
<b>Number (%)</b>	
Yes	36 (11.8)
No	247 (81.3)
Missing	21 (6.9)
Total	304 (100)

<b>Have you experienced any difficulties in securing paid time-off for other ULR activities?</b>	
<b>Number (%)</b>	
Yes	76 (25)
No	182 (59.9)
Missing	46 (15.1)
Total	304 (100)

categorised it as neither good nor poor, one in ten (11 per cent) as poor and a small minority (four per cent) as very poor.

## Employers

- Overwhelmingly ULRs are based in workplaces where the employer already recognises the union, suggesting the difficulty of establishing union learning in workplaces where the union does not have an existing relationship. It would appear that although unions can use union learning to build the union, it has not (yet at least) been used as a tool to extend unionisation to new employers.
- Over two thirds (67 per cent) of ULRs reported that the union has approached the employer for a learning agreement. Only just over a third (35 per cent), however, reported that there was a learning agreement in place between the union and employer, although in nearly half (48 per cent) of cases where the union had made an approach an agreement had been concluded. Over a third (37 per cent) of ULRs said there is no agreement in their workplace.
- New structures are emerging to deal with union learning in some cases. Just over one in five (21 per cent) of respondents reported that there was a new joint union/employer learning committee covering their workplace. In another one quarter an existing joint negotiating body covered union learning issues. In over a third there was no formal arrangement for dealing with union learning issues.

*'Management is disinterested and I don't think the issue has been pursued by the union hard enough' ULR*

*'I am attempting to negotiate a learning agreement but am meeting resistance from management' ULR*

- Nearly half of ULRs agreed that union learning encouraged co-operation between the employer and union on learning issues, but a quarter neither agreed nor disagreed and one in ten (eleven per cent) disagreed. However, respondents are less likely to believe that the existence of union learning encourages co-operation between the union and employer on issues other than learning; just over a third (37 per cent) agreed that it did, but a larger group neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Just over one in ten (13 per cent) believed that union learning did not encourage co-operation on other issues.

*'It does depend very much on how much the employer buys in. If an employer buys in in full, giving union learning reps adequate time, then you'll find a higher degree of success there. It's very much about how much each side is willing to put in.'*  
National Officer



## Conference Workshop Reports

The following reports outline some of the key points to be raised during workshop discussions.

### **1) Do learning agreements make a difference? Facilitator: Alan Roe, Amicus**

The general consensus in this group was that where learning agreements are negotiated they do make a difference to the ULR role and sustainability of learning projects.

#### ***Key issues:***

It is important to involve management at an early stage, to ensure their support and commitment. However, some concerns were raised about *who* should be responsible for negotiating a learning agreement, what role should ULRs play? (Different unions are developing different models and approaches for this)

Concerns were raised that learning agreements may constrain the role and development of ULRs if negotiated too early. In many cases, the best learning agreements have developed organically as reps expertise and confidence grows. The question of *when* to negotiate is important. ULRs should not be rushed into an agreement before they are ready or without proper support from their union.

Strategies for developing learning agreements vary. Some unions are targeting well organised workplaces, initially approaching management with a view to establishing a pilot project. There was a feeling that learning agreements may be more likely to be successful where they grow out of a successful project or joint initiative.

## Conference Workshop Reports

### **2) What is the ULR role in the regional/national union? Facilitator David Tarren, Amicus**

#### *A) The ULR role within the region*

ULRs should be fully integrated within the regional structure.

Skills are political, and this will give ULRs a chance to have an input into policy and have a voice.

By integrating ULRs into structures this will raise their status. We hear too many stories of people seeing ULRs as a 'second-class' activist. If others get to know what they do then this can only help.

ULRs have specific skills and should be utilised within the collective bargaining context because of this. They are part of a toolkit for supporting workers. Health and Safety reps are fully involved with all aspects of H&S, even negotiating (perhaps along with shop stewards, but nevertheless fully involved) – why should we treat the skills agenda any different?

Shop Stewards don't have the time to do everything, they need to 'let go' of certain issues around learning and skills.

#### *B) The ULR role in the national union*

ULRs should be involved in collective bargaining. However it is too early to tell if there is a role for ULRs at the national level – it also depends of the established machinery – i.e. is there a national agreement they can feed into?

ULRs should be involved in union conferences – perhaps certain seats should be reserved for ULRs as, for example in some unions like members from minority ethnic background, H&S reps, disabled members etc. Quite often ULRs are only allowed to attend conference if they are also shop stewards and wear this 'other hat'.

There could be a national structure utilising more experienced ULRs across the union. They could have a national committee that feeds into union Executives. Perhaps this could feed into sector conferences.

Unfortunately there are no clear progression routes yet established for ULRs to become FTOs. Although there are opportunities for ULRs to become project workers or hold other posts, this tends to mean remaining in the skills and learning area.

**3) Is learning an organising issue?  
Facilitator Trish Lavelle, CWU**

Yes:

- 1) ULRs have regular direct positive engagement with workers
- 2) Opportunities to develop large new pool of activists
- 3) Broadening appeal and reaching out to non-traditional groups
- 4) Political activity/workplace issues (i.e. political activity is likely to be something that develops over time)
- 5) 'Reject Patricia Hewitt' i.e. unions should reject the notion that union learning is a government, business driven agenda. TU Education is vitally important to the movement, teaching reps the right things at the right time.
- 6) Learning can play a positive role in countering the negative image of unions, e.g. in the media, building links with, e.g. community groups, and building alliances/networks etc.
- 7) Need to ensure control of our own union learning agenda
- 8) Independence of union learning agenda is very important. This doesn't mean not working with other people, but keeping sight of union goals and values.



## Conference Workshop Reports

### **4) Does learning relate to bargaining? Facilitators: Bert Clough, TUC, Mark Stuart, University of Leeds**

Workplace learning is of mutual interest to unions, employees and employers. If we learn new skills we are more marketable both within the company and in the wider job market. Learning is integral to many aspects of traditional union bargaining. It is linked to pay and conditions, health and safety, and equalities issues, for example.

If learning is treated by unions and employers as somehow being a 'separate issue', we risk marginalising it in the bargaining agenda. ULRs do not necessarily need to be involved in direct bargaining with the employer but neither should they be completely isolated from it.

It is also important to recognise that there may be a difference between a *real* commitment and a paper commitment.

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### 5) Is Union Learning sustainable?

Facilitator: James Rees, Usdaw

Yes, but unions need to ensure that certain things are in place:

- The workplace needs to be organised.
- Employers must be on board – dragged if necessary.
- There must be a network of ULRs and a workplace/joint learning committee
- Rule Books should acknowledge the ULR role.  
(Analogy of the Health and Safety Rep: ULRs should be of the same status or better).
- Learning paid officials? We need to ensure mechanisms are in place so that the learning agenda feeds into and is part of the negotiating agenda.
- We need to work with FE - colleges are geared up to deliver learning in the workplace that meets needs, not necessarily business led/business driven education. (i.e. learner centred not employer centred)
- Paid Educational Leave – need to build the union campaign for a statutory entitlement to paid time for learning during work hours.
- Statutory Learning Committees – need to have a right to a Workplace Learning Committee (Analogy – the Health and safety Committee)
- Funding to make learning affordable.

With these key elements in place Union Learning can be sustainable. With the support of the ULF, many unions are beginning to address these issues. However, support for the ULF needs to continue for some time yet to ensure the ongoing development of trade union capacity and long-term sustainability of the union learning agenda.

**6) Can we work with difficult employers?  
Facilitator: Kenny Barron, TGWU**

Constant changes in management can make sustainability difficult, learning agreements are essential to ensure that some permanence/continuity is possible when personnel change.

Generally, senior management are supportive, but this is often not the case at middle management level.

Problem for unions is being taken seriously on lifelong learning agenda, but where there is success employers may want to hijack it and cut unions out.

Times of industrial unrest are not the best time to try to engage employers, sometimes unions might be cut out of discussions. Often, however, difficult employers become less difficult in times of trouble, i.e. redundancy situations may find employers willing to work on learning initiatives with unions.

Important to educate employers/managers/middle managers, incorporate managers in training/lifelong learning.

Empower lay members, shop stewards, branches etc.

Statutory rights for ULRs are important, but have not been tested yet. Unions need a test case, but needs to be a successful one!

Also discussed problems of working with difficult providers: education providers may not be totally convinced of the lifelong learning agenda because they are not involved in their own lifelong learning as organisations and for their own staff. There can be problems with colleges, in terms of minimum flexibility and target led approaches.

**7) Can ULRs work without partnership?  
Facilitator: Mike Kidd, Amicus Unifi**

The question in itself raised a range of different interpretations of what partnership means. At one end was the highly structured, integrated at all levels partnership described by the colleague from the rail unions project in GNER, which includes all aspects of collective bargaining.<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the spectrum was the Sainsbury's model, as described by the T&G colleague, which seemed much looser and in practice (at least at workplace level) to be little more than traditional IR.

We also discussed whether partnership, in the sense of an employer-union partnership approach to learning, is essentially anything different to a learning agreement and whether this necessitates a wider partnership approach to industrial relations.

These questions aside, the answer to the question is clearly 'yes', they can, and the Ford EDAP scheme at Dagenham was cited as a prime example.

It was agreed though, that more employer commitment would make the ULRs' lives easier and that a degree of co-operation was clearly necessary for learning activity in the workplace. This would not necessarily need to entail a passive agreement from the employer to provide space for learning to take place on site.

However, examples of ULRs arranging learning opportunities outside of the workplace without employer support or even knowledge were raised. It was felt that high levels of ULR commitment, good support from their union and effective networking with other ULRs in the locality were pre-requisites for this approach to be effective.

Finally, it was agreed that ULRs needed to be fully involved and integrated into either the fabric of partnership agreements or the collective bargaining process if successful learning initiatives were to be delivered in the workplace.

<sup>1</sup> Although the discussion didn't dwell on this, the fact that learning is included in the partnership/collective bargaining agreements at GNER is clearly noteworthy of itself.



## Conference Workshop Reports

### **8) ULR training: what works? Facilitator: Judith Swift, TUC**

This workshop considered both formal training provided by the TUC and unions for ULRs, and the informal support that ULRs need to carry out the role effectively. It highlighted the importance of the initial, introductory ULR course and the need for a framework of courses that are flexible and adaptable, following on from that. It also highlighted the need for a pragmatic approach to ULR training, which responds to the needs of unions and ULRs as they emerge.

The ULR role is a new union role, but is changing fast.

The introductory five-day TUC course for ULRs tends to focus on the skills needed to identify achievable tasks and how to link the ULR role with the union locally. We need to review what is covered in the initial course and develop training that is flexible and responsive.

Learning Needs Survey, an important part of ULR training, needs to include branch and full-time union officers.

Formal/informal networking is vital but we need a pragmatic approach to the needs of Reps.

Build confidence and awareness of the ULR role.

It is important to build links to traditional union structures. We need to relate to other reps/organisers and should develop recruiting skills.

An on-line training option will shortly be available and 'blended' approaches to ULR training will be offered in the near future. We also need to ensure that on-line facilities are quality assured.

Union reps learn by doing, reflecting and reviewing their activities. ULR courses need to capture and respond to all these different aspects of learning and doing the role.



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## About The Working Lives Research Institute

The Working Lives Research Institute (WLRI) is a new centre for research and teaching, based at the London Metropolitan University. The Institute undertakes socially committed academic and applied research into all aspects of working lives, emphasising equality and social justice, and working for and in partnership with trade unions. For more information about the WLRI:

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