



**UNISON** learning & organising services  
**briefing number 2**

## Working with Equality Reps

### Why do we need Equality Reps?

Given the legislative advances of recent years, and the ways in which increased diversity is represented in the media, it might sometimes seem like many equalities issues have been settled once and for all.

But that's definitely not the case.

Take women's role in public life. At the current rate of progress, it would take another 73 years to achieve equal numbers of female directors of FTSE 100 companies, another 55 years to achieve an equal number of women in the judiciary and a massive 200 years to achieve an equal number of women MPs.

Or look at Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) representation in parliament. At the current rate of progress, it would take another 39 years before MPs accurately represented the ethnic diversity of the UK.

Living Together, a YouGov survey of more than 2000 adults commissioned by Stonewall in October 2006, found that nearly nine in ten voters would be comfortable if their MP was lesbian or gay, yet more than half felt that lesbian and gay people were likely to conceal their sexual orientation in politics.

Despite a decade of improvements in disabled people's rights, almost one in three young disabled people are outside any form of employment, education or training; a quarter feel they can do nothing to change their lives; and 80 per cent of people with mental health problems are out of work.

### What can Equality Reps do?

The Equality Duties, Agenda for Change, Single Status and the Knowledge and Skills

Framework have between them opened up a new range of opportunities to include equalities issues on the negotiating agenda to bring about change in the workplace.

But many branches aren't yet taking advantage of these opportunities – which is why UNISON is exploring how the new role of Equality Rep could help branches better address equalities issues.

Equality Reps have three main areas of work:

- advocating equalities good practice in the workplace (but not taking on casework)
- working with the negotiating team in the branch to promote equalities issues, especially through The Equality Duties
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### How can equalities work boost learning?

Access to learning is often an equalities issue: a wide range of groups of workers have restricted access to learning and training opportunities in the workplace.

- The 2007 TUC report Time to Tackle the Training Divide reveals that while 41 per cent of graduate employees had recently participated in job-related training when the survey was conducted, only 12 per cent of employees with no qualifications (overwhelmingly low-paid workers) had had the same opportunities.
- According to the 2009 Cabinet Office White Paper on social mobility, New Opportunities: Fair Chances For The Future, "many disabled people experience a range of barriers within the labour market, including limited specialist skills training, low aspirations,

discrimination and geographical barriers.”

- According to the Labour Force Survey 2008, 32 per cent of BME workers had not been offered training by their current employer in the three months before the survey.
- An analysis of data from the British Household Panel Survey quoted in the Women and Work Commission report in 2006 finds that both men and women working part time are about 40 per cent less likely to receive work-related training than those in full-time jobs – the majority of part-time workers still being women.
- While two out of three existing jobs and nine out of ten new jobs ask for ICT skills, there is an age bias to training opportunities in the workplace that discriminates against older workers: only one in five employees aged 50-59 have had IT training recently, compared to one in three 25-49 year olds (Age Concern, 2007).

### **Case study: North Wales Central Health Branch**

North Wales Central Health Branch, which is part of the Establishing Equality Reps in UNISON pilot, has already undertaken a lot of work to promote equalities in the workplace.

Most successful to date has been its Dignity and Respect sessions, organised in partnership with the trust, 15-minute introductory briefings on what's acceptable and what's not when talking to people in the workplace which have been rolled out to 800 staff so far.

It's currently working on a new basic skills programme in partnership with the basic skills manager for the trust.

“We're working on a programme of managing money and basic cookery encompassing literacy and numeracy on an equal footing,” explains branch chair Jan Tomlinson.

“Although it's been highlighted that it's not just low-band people who have problems with numeracy and literacy, we know of areas where people can't do their jobs

properly because they can't read and write,” she says.

“But we can't go in there heavy-handed and say ‘This is what we're bringing you today,’ so we felt with the credit crunch and healthy eating being on everyone's minds at the moment, if we approached it this way round, we'd stand a better chance of bringing them into the learning part of what the union can offer.”

In addition, the branch is offering more support for Polish and Filipino nursing home staff by organising to get their staff handbooks translated into their mother tongues, with the help of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

“Although they can read English, we're saying that if the handbooks are in their mother tongue that it would mean more to them, so we're working on that at the moment,” Jan says.

### **Action Points for Union Learning Reps**

- Find out if your branch has an Equality Rep
- You could run a briefing in your branch on learning and equality.\*\*
- Talk to your Branch Equality Officer about jointly running a survey on equalities issues in your branch.
- Are you interested in the Equality Rep role? Find out more about training as an Equality Rep.\*\* The course will be available in regions from September.
- If you are also a steward, you may be interested in the steward's refresher course, available from the autumn, which introduces the equality duties.\*\*

*\*\* For information about training or briefing materials contact your Regional Education Officer or Regional Learning Development Organiser.*

### **Who to ask for help in UNISON**

To find out more about the Establishing Equality Reps in UNISON project, contact Learning and Organising Services Officer Diana Veitch  
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