

Action on HIV/AIDS

Working with sister unions worldwide to tackle HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is a workplace issue

In 2007, about 33.2 million people were living with HIV/AIDS. With a large number of these individuals aged between 15 and 49, they make up a significant proportion of the working population.

Trade unions have a vital role to play in the fight against HIV/AIDS by ensuring that the interests of workers infected or affected by HIV/AIDS are represented in the workplace; education and training on HIV/AIDS is available to members and families; and access to care and treatment is negotiated. Trade union action is crucial in challenging stigma and discrimination of those who are HIV-positive.



HIV/AIDS should be recognised as a workplace issue ... not only because it affects the workforce, but also because the workplace, being part of the local community, has a role to play in the wider struggle to limit the spread and effects of the epidemic.”

International Labour Organization, 2001

The global picture

Every day, 5,700 people die from HIV/AIDS – it is one of the major causes of death globally. Sub-Saharan Africa is the most seriously affected region, with HIV/AIDS the main cause of death there.

According to UNAIDS and the World Health Organization most die due to lack of access to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services. Therefore, the need to strengthen universal access to public health services is critical in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The impacts of HIV/AIDS are far-reaching: skilled and experienced workers are lost; health services are placed under increasing pressure; women may have to care for those who are sick, in addition to carrying out their paid work; and the loss of family income can severely increase poverty.

Poverty is a major factor affecting the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS. People from poorer backgrounds tend to lack access to health and social services and may not have the literacy skills needed to access information on HIV/AIDS prevention.

In developing countries, the impact of HIV/AIDS is compounded by economic policies imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Governments are forced to reduce public expenditure if they wish to access debt relief and aid, with disastrous consequences for public services. Workers who die from HIV/AIDS may not be replaced, while others may be made redundant and vital health and safety protections may not be provided. As a result, public sector workers are faced with enormous challenges.

“It was incredible to see how serious UNISON is in tackling this problem for its own members – and so serious that it even wants to help other public service unions. It really recognises HIV/AIDS as a trade union issue.”

**Busi Tshabalala,
National Education,
Health and Allied
Workers Union
(NEHAWU), South Africa**

The facts

In 2007:
33.2 million people were living with HIV/AIDS
2.1 million people died of HIV/AIDS
5,700 people died from HIV/AIDS every day
22.5 million people were living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.
Source: UNAIDS/World Health Organization

“We are losing members to HIV/AIDS – they are dying – and that in turn affects our capacity to respond.”

Pontius Kalichero, Civil Servants Trade Union, Malawi

UNISON's role

As the UK's largest public services union, UNISON has expertise in delivering public services, representing working people and successful collective bargaining. Our domestic HIV/AIDS work includes working with branches to ensure employers have negotiated policies and procedures to support HIV-positive employees; adequate training and information is provided; and stigma and discrimination are challenged through robust complaints procedures and positive representation of HIV issues. We bring this knowledge and understanding to our work with sister unions across the world in their struggle to improve workplace rights for people affected by HIV/AIDS.

Why prioritise work on HIV/AIDS?

On the international stage, our HIV/AIDS work has focused on working with public sector trade unions in southern Africa. UNISON has a long history of collaborating with unions in this region and UNISON's sister unions have asked that we support them in tackling HIV/AIDS. This is a priority issue for them.

In 2001, UNISON's national delegate conference committed to:

“support our sister unions across the developing world, through our international affiliations, in their struggle to promote education and behaviour change in the workplace; eliminate discrimination, stigma and denial; and empower workers to end the burden brought on them by this disease.”

International solidarity

UNISON has been awarded £370,000 by the UK Department for International Development to strengthen the public sector trade union response to HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. The main aims of this project are to:

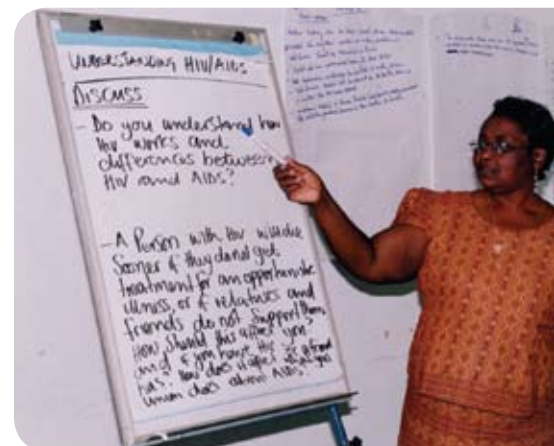
- build the capacity of trade unions in southern Africa to take forward their own programmes of work on HIV/AIDS
- strengthen unions' regional response to the disease and its impacts.

The funding will be used to expand an earlier 18-month UNISON project to develop unions' capacity to respond to HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. That project, completed in 2007, laid the foundation for the current Strengthening the Public Sector Trade Union Response to HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa project. This project will run from 2008 to 2011 and involves around 30 trade unions from: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

To ensure the project meets the needs of our sister unions, UNISON organised a workshop in London for southern African trade unionists to discuss, advise on and agree details of how the project would be delivered. In addition participants



Trade unionists participating in the southern African workshop (see right), February 2008, visit Barnet Primary Care and Mental Health Branch of UNISON



UNISON International Development Fund – workshop on HIV/AIDS, Zambia.

were able to learn about UNISON's structure and priorities. In turn, the workshop gave UNISON representatives the opportunity to learn about the different approaches to tackling HIV/AIDS taken by unions and national governments in southern Africa.

“This project will help us formulate our own workplace policies on HIV/AIDS, owned by the worker and not the employer.”

Patrick Mazila, Civil Servants and Allied Workers Unions, Zambia

Key project activities

The project will deliver a number of activities to strengthen public sector trade unions' response to HIV/AIDS:

- One national seminar will take place in each country, where unions can share best practice and receive training on issues such as developing trade union and workplace policies on HIV/AIDS; negotiating inclusion of HIV/AIDS provisions in collective bargaining agreements; and using the International Labour Organization (ILO) and WHO codes of conduct on the health and safety of workers affected by HIV/AIDS.
- Two regional seminars to share skills and best practice, and identify collaborative ways of responding to the pandemic.
- A resource centre will be set up to meet the education, training and information needs of trade union members and public sector workers.
- Specialist one-to-one advice, support and training.
- A fund that can be accessed by unions wanting to carry out small-scale projects.

This project builds on UNISON's proud record of supporting its international sister unions on HIV/AIDS by for example:

- organising a seminar on HIV/AIDS in Johannesburg in 2004, bringing together 70 delegates from every public sector trade union in the region to share experiences and best practice
- inviting trade unionists working on HIV/AIDS in Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe to attend UNISON national delegate conference in 2005
- sending a UNISON expert on health and safety to advise during negotiations between Public Services International, WHO and ILO on guidelines for health workers affected by HIV/AIDS.
- contributing funding for the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions HIV/AIDS campaign co-ordinator in 2005 and 2006.
- launching the UNISON International Development Fund (UIDF), which aims to build the long-term capacity of unions and other labour movement organisations outside the UK. The fund has been used to support specific HIV/AIDS programmes by sister unions in Zambia, Mauritius, Zimbabwe and Bangladesh.

UK campaigns

UNISON is the only trade union member of the Stop Aids Campaign, a coalition of more than 80 organisations campaigning to raise awareness in the UK about the global HIV/AIDS pandemic and to campaign for international action. The campaign successfully lobbied the UK government and secured a commitment from the G8 countries to ensure universal access to treatment, prevention and care for HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB by 2010.



Representatives from the Civil Servants Trade Union at the UNISON organised HIV/AIDS seminar, Johannesburg, 2004



Successful campaigning ensures G8 commitment to universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS by 2010.

“UNISON can be really proud of the contribution that it is making in supporting the trade union response to HIV/AIDS in southern Africa. I urge all our members to get involved in our work and to help overcome the pandemic.”

Dave Prentis, UNISON general secretary

The campaign is currently calling on the UK government to strengthen health systems; reduce the price of essential medicines and promote generic medicines; and pay its fair share into the Global Fund to help ensure the 2010 commitment to providing prevention and treatment is delivered.

UNISON also uses its political influence to lobby MPs and ministers to raise awareness and ask them to take action to address the impacts of HIV/AIDS on workers, trade unions and public services.

Next steps

UNISON's future work on HIV/AIDS will focus on:

- working with sister unions to effectively deliver the project in southern Africa
- involving UNISON branches and regions in the project and other HIV/AIDS work
- campaigning to strengthen health systems globally.

What UNISON branches are doing and how you can get involved

- Highlighting UNISON's work on HIV/AIDS at branch meetings and in publications, using the new project as an example.
- Building relationships with sister unions involved in the HIV/AIDS project. This includes: sharing information, skills and best practice on a range of trade union issues; the provision of IT equipment and training; and the organisation of exchange visits with sister unions.
- participating in postcard campaigns to support UK campaigning.

If you or your organisation would like to find out more or support UNISON's international work on HIV/AIDS or other areas of UNISON's international work visit:

www.unison.org.uk/international

email: I.Relations@unison.co.uk

To find out more about our work on HIV/AIDS issues in the UK use our health and safety document search at:

www.unison.org.uk/safety

For more information about UNISON call 0845 355 0845

0800 0 967 968 (textphone) Monday-Friday 6am-midnight and Saturday 9am-4pm **www.unison.org.uk**