

# GREEN UNISON



Green bargaining  
and negotiating in the  
workplace

**the role of the environment rep**

## Introduction

Union reps have been quietly getting on with the job of organising union-led environmental projects within workplaces for decades. There have been thousands of environment reps across the UK running successful projects of all sizes.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel, let's build on what's gone before and share experiences.

## Role of the environment rep

There are no legal rights to facility time for an environment rep, the union movement has lobbied on this for decades. But the role can potentially be huge, impacting on all aspects of a business or organisation. For this reason, it is essential the role is mainstreamed into the work a branch does.

The work of an environment rep is every bit as important as the more traditional roles undertaken by union reps. Expect environment reps to become a critical part of the branch structure if we are to build a just transition to a greener economy.

A just transition ensures that changes to workplace practices to reduce an organisation's environmental impact are done in consultation with the workforce and unions – not done to the workforce.

## The role may include:

- raising awareness of environmental issues in the workplace among colleagues and your branch e.g. running events, launching staff surveys
- negotiating for facility time and structures such as joint employer/union committees to discuss environmental issues and agree actions
- promoting union campaigns and policy on environmental issues and taking them forward with your branch
- liaising with your branch on green issues that should be taken up with management
- carrying out workplace environmental audits to identify issues that need action
- monitoring and negotiating with your employer on their progress towards agreed environmental targets

- asking lots of questions! Establishing baselines, scoping possible projects. Has your employer declared a climate emergency? Do they have an action plan? What are their emissions and targets?
- working alongside other branch roles such as health and safety, union learning roles and communication officers.

## Lessons learned from greenworkplace projects

There is no one size fits all approach because union branches and structures can differ. But top tips include:

- **making a joint union approach to management** to get the employer on-side
- **get senior management buy-in** – especially bosses that hold purse strings
- **identify a high-level sponsor and ally** – someone in senior management whose key performance targets depend upon you doing well e.g. sustainability/energy manager
- **make a moral case** – not just a business case – because when times are bad, the workforce can withdraw its good will. At some point you'll plateau on energy savings and financial savings. Keep momentum going by doing it for the right reasons

- **make the environment a priority** – not just with employers but within your branch. Often green reps struggle to sit on negotiating/decision-making bodies
- **establish structures** – negotiate for a joint environment committee with management and for facility time for reps. This will help you to have a bigger and faster impact. But don't let its absence stop you getting active. The TUC has model agreements on this
- **use union bureaucracy to your advantage** – get your branch to pass environmental motions. Do your groundwork, find out who on your branch is likely to support it
- **involve every worker** – include a broad spectrum of occupations on your committee – manual workers, technical staff, white collar, shift workers etc. People from different departments and with knowledge of working practices across the organisation or business. Unlock everyone's potential and expertise, respect everyone's contribution equally. Any transition to a greener way of working must be built from the grassroots if it is to be fair and just
- **make your campaigns highly visible and different from the usual union campaigns.** Surprise people and make sure UNISON can't be ignored

on environmental issues. Use stunts, events and link to action people can take at home too. Make it mean something to individuals.

## How do we make projects sustainable?

**Negotiating a joint agreement on climate change with the employer,** agreeing terms of reference for a joint environment committee and gaining rights to facility time will help hold the employer to account and bring them back to the negotiating table when needed.

**Share the workload!** It's a labour-intensive role, use it as an organising opportunity to recruit new members and encourage new

activists. Don't overburden people, even if they are enthusiastic. Foster their interest, build momentum steadily.

**Cascade knowledge** – Strong characters can often drive projects but if they leave the organisation you lose all their expertise and drive. Build a team. Don't aim to be the font of all knowledge to everyone, share it.

**Start small, with quick wins, build momentum** – prove your worth slowly. Don't bite off more than you can chew for starters. Build trust among the workforce and management.

**Celebrate success with a strong UNISON identity** – strengthen organisation and support.

## Useful Links:

Some of these are dated, particularly with regard to policy issues but have useful tips and case studies for organising:

[https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/greener\\_deals.pdf](https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/greener_deals.pdf)

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/extras/greenworkplacesreport.pdf>

<https://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/> - regular newsletters and online courses.

**Find out more information at**

<https://www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/green-unison/>