

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

**MIGRANT WORKERS  
PARTICIPATION PROJECT**

**UNISON – case study**

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# UNISON - Migrant workers participation project

## Background

Migrant workers make up a large and growing part of the public sector workforce, particularly the health service and many of the outsourced areas of work, such as catering and cleaning. The proportion of migrant workers in the public sector has nearly doubled in the last ten years to 13%. And in some key growth areas such as social care they account for nearly 20% of the workforce. UNISON has sought to recruit migrant workers into membership over many years. Since about 2004 there have been specific targeted recruitment campaigns aimed at migrant workers in different parts of the UK, and since 2005 UNISON has sought to develop a coordinated policy on migrant workers through a national Migrant Workers National Working Party.

UNISON encourages all members to take part in the union and its democratic structures, as Greg Thomson, National Development Manager, explains:

‘Specific efforts are made to encourage members who have traditionally felt excluded (such as women and those from ethnic minorities) to participate in the union through, among other things, rules around proportionality, fair representation and the encouragement of self organisation. Yet despite the growing number of members who are migrant workers, there appeared to be hardly any migrant workers active within the union. Our experience showed that some of the barriers faced by migrant workers are different and require a fresh approach. Migrant workers often have a different cultural, economic and social background and their experience of trade unions may be negative. So, for example, workers from A8 countries (the eight countries that joined the EU in 2004 - mainly ex-communist bloc) have a completely different experience of what trade unions do and their democratic accountability, given the very

different social and political history in those countries. Migrant workers may also feel that their participation in trade unions would be resented by indigenous workers or that trade unions are not relevant to their needs. These complex social barriers to participation can be further exacerbated by language barriers.’

## Why this project?

UNISON already had a variety of different initiatives relating to migrant workers at both regional and national level, and in different services - such as the National Health Service, where a large number is employed. Greg Thomson continues:

‘There is now a degree of coordination through the Migrant Workers National Working Party. However, this work is largely reactive, benchmarking and sharing best practice from individual initiatives. Experience shows that the best way of addressing the needs of groups that have traditionally felt excluded from trade union membership is to get their active participation. It was felt that participation by migrant workers would make the union more responsive to their needs, helping to ensure that they receive fair treatment, dignity and respect in the workplace, which would in turn help to reduce the social and economic exclusion which UNISON has found is experienced by many migrant workers. A more proactive approach was needed to get migrant workers to engage with the union. This required a team who could work across the union’s regions and with migrant worker groups around the country.’

The union had no financial provision for such a team and additional money would have been required to establish one. Without additional funding from the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF), therefore, UNISON would have had to continue to take a reactive approach to migrant workers and would not have

been able to undertake the transformational work of getting migrant workers to participate fully in the union.

### Aims and objectives

The project identified five aims and objectives:

1. **Proportional participation by migrant workers in UNISON** - Participation in the democratic processes of the union by migrant workers that is proportionate to participation by migrant workers in the public sector, including contracted out services. 'It is recognised that this will take more than two years to achieve, but within the two-year life of the project there should be a significant increase on the current level of participation, which can be measured against targets set on the basis of mapping by the Working Lives Institute.'
2. **Participation at all levels in UNISON** - Increased numbers of migrant worker stewards and activists at all levels. 'Participation should be reflected across the range of activist posts, and not simply concentrated in one specific area, such as lifelong learning. Within the two-year life of the project the aim will be to have migrant workers playing an active role in the various roles that exist at branch level, including shop stewards, health and safety reps and lifelong learning, as well as taking officer posts in a number of branches where there are large concentrations of migrant worker members. This would then provide a platform for further development.'
3. **Mainstreaming of migrant worker issues** - The mainstreaming of migrant worker issues in employment relations in the workplace. 'The aim was to develop new agreements and understanding about developing migrant workers within the two-year period, which could be used as examples of best

practice. These agreements would cover areas such as health and safety, qualification, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.'

4. **Reduced exclusion of migrants in the workplace** - Reduced economic and social exclusion of migrant workers in the workplace. 'Over the life of the project the aim was to identify examples of best practice where new agreements and understandings have been put in place and where it can be shown that social cohesion amongst workers in the workplace has been increased.'
5. **Provision of more relevant services** - UNISON providing services that better meet the needs of migrant workers. 'During the project UNISON would develop services that are more sensitive to the needs of migrant workers, the aim being for migrant workers themselves to play a key part in identifying these improvements in services.'

### Methodology

The migrant workers participation team was set up to educate UNISON officials and activists about the needs and aspirations of migrant workers, helping to ensure that the existing structures become sensitised to the needs of migrant workers. As more migrant workers become active in the union, so the issues they are raising will be mainstreamed, reinforcing the training messages.

### Monitoring and evaluation

Quantifiable targets were identified on a geographical basis and used to measure progress against the overall objective of achieving proportional participation in the union by migrant workers. UNISON uses a documented programme management process for all large-scale projects (including this one), which includes regular review and evaluation.

The project board had oversight and received reports on the detailed work of the migrant workers participation team on a regular basis. Regular reports were also made to meetings of the union's national executive council (NEC), setting out progress against the key objectives. Progress on the project was also reported in the union's annual report to the national delegate conference. The Working Lives Institute provided a regular assessment of progress with the project every six months, together with a final assessment at the conclusion of the project. This provided third party validation of the work being undertaken as well as an independent assessment of its success against the agreed objectives.

## Mapping

The first task of the project was for the Working Lives Institute to map the number of migrant worker activists in the union as a proportion of migrant worker members and potential migrant worker members. This was done through a telephone survey of a sample of 100 UNISON branches spread over the 12 Unison regions and three service groups: local government, health and higher education (a 10% sample) in December 2007.

The second task was to begin to identify the factors that encourage or inhibit migrant workers from becoming active in Unison. This was done through a number of focus groups of UNISON migrant worker activists.

Four key elements then took shape, including:

- Promulgation materials
- Outreach through community networks
- Talent spotting
- Pathways into UNISON course

## Outcomes

### Survey, focus groups and interviews

The survey suggested that the number of branches with migrant workers who were active was very low – under one in five (12%) of all branches in the survey, and over three quarters (84%) said there were none. The focus groups confirmed that fear was an issue in deterring migrant workers from trade union activity. This emanated from their legal and political status, with a perception that any involvement in political activity may impact on their right to remain in the UK.

However, the initial research suggested the important role played by branches, and key activists in those branches, in encouraging migrant worker activity. This was confirmed in subsequent research. One of the migrant workers interviewed had been elected as an International Officer in her branch and used this position to support international work, such as raising aid for the victims of the Tsunami, as well as support for migrant workers, particularly senior care workers affected by changes to requirements for extending work permits made by the Home Office in 2007. The post-project follow-up survey of branches asked respondents to identify initiatives that have encouraged migrant worker activism over the past 12 months. The survey suggests that branches still face some difficulties in responding to the challenge.

Evidence from focus groups and interviews with migrant workers reported that they were attracted into membership because they believed that UNISON could provide support and representation in the workplace, as well as advice on employment rights. A number of focus group participants reported having seen union literature highlighting examples of where the union had supported migrant workers

and this encouraged them to join. However, they noted that some migrant workers (but also British workers) felt the £7 a month subscription rate was too much (although UNISON has variable subscription rates dependent upon pay rates) or did not see how the union could help them, or that it was only worth joining when there was a problem. Participants reported that often migrant workers were not aware of the union and/or how to join and perceived that it was not for care assistants. A number of migrant workers in NHS Trusts reported that 'roadshows' held in hospitals in which UNISON may take part can play a role in recruiting members.

One activist described how in the Philippines union membership could be equated with political involvement and seen as 'anti-establishment' – this could discourage the recruitment and organisation of Filipino workers into UK unions and so in recruiting other Filipino workers she would focus upon practical examples of where UNISON had supported care workers' rights in nursing homes - for example, where the union had taken up cases of care workers being recruited in the Philippines and having their contracts changed once they were in the UK. However, she also stressed that: 'There is some fear and they are still vulnerable because they want to take their job and they would rather not speak out, so it's also the political fear in terms of the job security and that their job is not compromised if they become members'.

Whilst many migrant workers reported positive experiences of support from union branches, others felt that availability was a problem.

The focus groups suggested that health and safety is a key concern for migrant workers. One particular issue is staff shortages in care homes leaving workers to undertake tasks like moving and handling which require more than one worker on their own or to work nightshifts alone.

**Proportional participation** - It proved impossible to measure the numbers of migrant workers in the membership of UNISON, although the initial survey work confirmed that they were underrepresented. Consequently, an indicative target was agreed with colleagues from BIS of around 100. In the event, about 70 migrants became shop stewards and took on other formal roles within the UNISON structure. But it was also clear that many migrants took on informal roles within UNISON giving advice to colleagues. At the conclusion of the project there were around 670 migrants in the informal network established by the project.

**Participation at different levels** - Migrants were encouraged to become active in all aspects of UNISON work. One of the key mechanisms adopted for encouraging activity was the Pathways into UNISON course developed for migrants. The course helped migrants explore various aspects of UNISON work including health and safety, learning, and equalities. Migrants who became active through the project undertook a variety of roles, including learning rep, shop steward and health and safety rep. Others who were already active in the union took on new responsibilities, with at least one becoming a branch secretary. 'It was gratifying to see through the life of the project more and more migrants attending conferences including the black members' conference and national delegate conference, as this showed a greater participation in the democratic life of the union.'

**Mainstreaming** - Migrant workers appeared on the agendas of the two national delegate conferences which took place during the life of the project. And there were examples of work being done by the union to help migrants with language and citizenship issues at a local level. However, the longer-term integration of migrant worker issues into the life of UNISON is a long-term aspiration and it is to be hoped that the union will continue to engage with



migrants. Adds Greg, 'It was interesting to note that there were presentations on this subject to lay member committees and conferences, as well as the full time structure senior management group by the project manager even after the project had finished on 15 January 2010.'

**Reduced exclusion** – Greg identifies two aspects to exclusion: 'One is exploitation of workers who have little or no representation in the workplace. The project undoubtedly helped overcome some of these problems by increasing the supply of representatives who understand the challenges faced by migrant workers. The other is exclusion from the union structures themselves. When branches were surveyed at the start of the project there was no overt hostility to working with migrant workers. Most public service workers are only too well aware that our public services are dependent on migrant workers to make them function. However, many activists saw language and culture as real barriers to recruiting migrants. In addition, a lot of migrants worked in outsourced services and many activists were reluctant to organise outsourced workers.'

**Relevant services** - As a result of the research and interaction with migrants it was possible to identify two key areas of service where migrants had specific needs. For migrants from outside the EU, language was not a barrier, but migration status could be and UNISON established a migration advice helpline as a direct result of the Project. In March 2009 UNISON, working with the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), launched a free immigration telephone advice line for its members who have come to work in the UK from countries outside of the European Union. It provides advice on immigration issues related to the work situation and the right to work in the UK. For workers from other EU countries language was an important issue. It was one that the union had already taken up and one that the union continues to pursue for

migrants through negotiating English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in the workplace and the provision of directly funded UNISON ESOL courses.

**Promulgation materials** - The project produced materials to encourage migrant worker representation and organisation, including a guide to recruiting migrant workers, available via the project website. 'Equally important to the drive to involve migrant workers was the need to develop additional tools to reach out to them. The initial survey showed that around a third of UNISON branches do not actively organise amongst outsourced workers, which is where the majority of migrants are to be found. There were also issues about perceived barriers to migrants becoming active in UNISON both amongst activists and migrants. Consequently it was necessary to use web-based communications and work with migrant community groups to identify potential activists.'

**Outreach through community networks** - The project developed relationships between the union and migrant community networks and identified potential activists through outreach work with migrant community groups. 'Unionisation can be reinforced and encouraged by community networks. This was particularly true for Filipino care workers where the Filipino Alliance played a key role in activation.'

**Talent spotting** - Potential activists were identified and mentored through work with community groups, but also by branches, regional officers and migrant worker activists themselves. 'The focus groups underlined that it is not just that migrant workers had to be willing to be active – branches also had to be receptive and this was often dependent upon the efforts of individual activists in supporting migrant workers and ensuring access to training. Working with migrant community organisations the project team was able to talent spot potential activists, who were then

encouraged to become active, and given training on the Pathways into UNISON for Migrant Workers course.'

**Pathways into UNISON** - Potential activists identified by promulgation materials, outreach and talent spotting were encouraged to attend the Pathways into UNISON course. Evaluation by the Working Lives Research Institute says that 'one of the major achievements of the project has been the engagement of migrant workers through the Pathways into UNISON course'. These are free two day residential pilot courses developed by the union's Learning and Organising Services (LAOS) and the Migrant Workers Unit. The aim of the course is encourage and support migrant workers who are members of UNISON to become more active in the union. The course covers representation and organising; how to become more involved in the union; union structures; handling issues in the workplace; and action planning. During the project, six courses were run in different regions, attracting 92 workers of more than 14 nationalities. Two thirds were from health service branches, with nearly a quarter from local government and a minority from higher education. The response to the Pathways into UNISON courses has been enthusiastic. As one 26 year old Eastern European street cleaner who has been in the UK for almost three years put it: 'Thanks to this course I know what I want to do in UNISON and whom to speak to. I contacted my branch and I want to go on a training course for health and safety rep because this is a very important issue in my workplace. I have my own mentor who is a colleague from the course and who could help me at any time. I would recommend this course for any person who wants to learn more about UNISON and wants to become an active member just like me now!' A follow-up survey undertaken in the short period since the courses had been held shows that 10% of the participants had become workplace contacts; 20% had become stewards;

2% health and safety reps; 5% union learning reps; 3% equality reps and 7% branch officers - thus over a third (39%) already held positions in their branches.

## Lessons learned

The following lessons were learned:

- Many regions and branches have developed innovative approaches to the organisation of migrant workers. The evidence shows that organising is most successful where migrant workers are specifically targeted, with dedicated resources.
- Migrants were sometimes put off by the complexity of UNISON meetings and language that was used at those meetings. More open, informal and inclusive meetings were more successful at attracting migrants.
- There is a concentration of migrants in the privatised sector. Yet over a third of branches reported that they do not recruit in the privatised sector, while some migrants view UNISON as a union representing only those directly employed by the public sector. This means that for migrants in the privatised sector there is a double barrier to participation.
- Crucially, migrant workers are underrepresented amongst UNISON activists. Increasing the number of migrant worker activists would help increase membership among migrant workers.
- The participation project was successfully able to reach out to migrant workers because of the campaigning work that UNISON has done to ensure that migrant workers are treated fairly and with dignity and respect.

## Looking ahead

Follow up work is needed to encourage migrants, particularly those who attended Pathways courses to undertake further training. Service delivery will be reviewed to ensure that it is sensitive to the needs of migrant workers and this process will become embedded as more migrant workers become active in the union. For example the provision of representational services needs to be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic barriers that may exist for migrant workers, as more migrants become active UNISON will increase its understanding of these issues. Appropriateness of UNISON response will also be measured via close engagement with relevant migrant workers' groups. Greg continues:

'The outcomes would also affect the approach taken to employers by adding a further dimension to the bargaining agenda around the development and integration of migrant workers. So for instance the bargaining agenda pursued by the union will become more reflective of the needs of migrant workers in areas such as health and safety, qualification and language training. This will in turn lead to a more integrated workforce with migrant workers feeling more confident about becoming active in the union and seeing the union as more relevant to their needs.

'Getting more migrants involved is part of a long-term process which will continue beyond the life of the project, building on the intense work already done. The project has undoubtedly started to break down some of the barriers, but much remains to be done and work on the vulnerable workforce supported by the UMF Round 3 project will help with this. As migrant workers become more involved in the union's structures that in itself will act as a draw for other migrant workers to become involved. Migrant workers are more likely to join and become active in an organisation where they can see that other migrant workers already play an

active part. So essentially once migrant workers become active in the union a virtuous circle is created whereby more are likely to become active.'

## Conclusions

The project met its objectives and has great potential for continuing transformation. Participant observation of the Pathways into UNISON courses, for example, along with the focus group research underlined that the project has successfully identified a substantial group of migrant workers with the capacity and enthusiasm to become more active in the union. Greg sums up:

'Overall it is right to say that the UMF project gave UNISON the opportunity to do an important piece of work that would not otherwise have happened. The real challenge was reaching out to migrants through the existing structures, where migrant worker participation vies with numerous other priorities. It is important to celebrate the participation of those migrants who have become active, as they provide excellent role models. Individual stories can also illustrate the potential contribution migrants can make to UNISON at branch and regional level.'

'The key achievement of the project has been the engagement of a cohort of migrant workers, developed through the UNISON Pathways to Activism course, which has been met with enthusiasm by participants. These activists have recruited substantial numbers of members into the union, largely through their community networks. Many had already taken up positions in the union and others were keen for further involvement and to undertake training for union rep roles.'



## Recommendations

Working Lives' evaluation report proposes the following recommendations:

- UNISON to ensure that there is comprehensive follow-up activity in respect of all those who have participated in the Migrant UNISON Pathways to Activism course in terms of (1) offering further training and (2) making sure that participants are put in touch with their branch.
- That migrant workers be encouraged to attend wider UNISON education and training courses, in particular health and safety rep training and shop steward training.
- That the UNISON Pathways to Activism be seen as an effective model which can encourage generalized participation and activism of not only migrant but also other groups of workers with limited experience of the union.
- Currently UNISON publicity emphasizes the role of migrant workers in public services, but UNISON should also promote recognition of their contribution to the union – this should be done at all levels of UNISON emphasizing their potential for the long term strength of the union.
- That the potential contribution and role of migrant workers in strengthening branches be communicated to branches and reflected in branch activity as part of the Branch Assessment Exercise.
- That UNISON consider the representation and organization of members in privatised services, who are disproportionately women, BME and migrant workers, including national recognition and facilities agreements.
- That dedicated resources, in terms of project workers or support at national level, can make a difference in facilitating and supporting migrant worker involvement.
- That the model, structure and style of meetings be considered noting that inclusive, open, informal meetings may encourage participation.
- That UNISON consider the potential benefits of alternative models of organisation and participation provided by community networks as a means to engage with migrant and other workers.

## Case study

In the West Midlands UNISON at a regional level responded to changes to requirements for extending work permits for senior care workers made by the Home Office in 2007 by organising a meeting in Coventry for largely Filipino care workers. This became a political campaign which successfully lobbied government to make some concessions in the regulations. It has led to regular meetings and to the recruitment and organisation of at least 50 workers through community networks in the region and the emergence of five long-term, committed activists, who have completed the Pathways course and are now accredited representatives. It has also led to UNISON organisation and individual representation in a domiciliary care agency and in one large national private residential care organisation, with the prospect of a national agreement. A number of health branches in the region have engaged with migrant workers. The regional officer commented that he believed that the core activists involved in the campaign will have a longstanding relationship with UNISON, but that they would relate to their own communities and maintain a relationship with the UNISON region rather than branches.

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