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**UNION MODERNISATION FUND –
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**GENERAL FEDERATION OF TRADE
UNIONS AND CONNECT (GFTU) – A
NEW AGENDA FOR EQUALITY IN
THE WORKPLACE**

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General Federation of Trade Unions and Connect – A new agenda for equality in the workplace

Introduction

The General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) is the UK's federal body for small, specialist trade unions and has within its affiliates a wide range of membership. From the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP), to the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), the organisation represents trade unions and professional associations in the majority of employment sectors. The GFTU currently has 32 affiliates with 320,000 members.

The GFTU strategic plan commits it to developing measures that support the capacity of affiliates to organise workers in their relevant sectors and represent the spread of diverse worker interests. The average size of GFTU affiliates tends to mean that the GFTU leads on significant new strategic developments and then the affiliate works in partnership with them to embed these developments within their own structures.

The main work of the GFTU is providing education and training for its affiliates, which is delivered via a registered charitable trust. This Union Modernisation Fund (UMF) project was delivered in partnership with Ruskin College and Northern College.

In partnership with Connect (one of its affiliates, the union for professionals in communications), GFTU was granted UMF funding to deliver a two-year project to train and support cohorts of workplace training reps, with particular emphasis on workplace equality and diversity.

Why this project?

The GFTU found that in some smaller, specialist trade unions it has been difficult to develop a specific focus on equalities, as limitations on full-time officer numbers, coupled with pressure of work, have historically prevented this. The GFTU realised that this typically was not through a lack of will, since many of these unions already had formal national policies on equalities. What were missing were capacity-building initiatives to allow this work to develop and grow. This UMF project would enable smaller unions to develop (and where appropriate pool) their capacity to focus on the needs of members who may have previously felt disenfranchised from trade union activity and/or had not seen their specific issues taken seriously by their union.

Judith Jackson, GFTU Head of Educational Services, explains:

'This project was a unique opportunity to reinforce the place of equalities at the centre of the negotiating agenda. Legislative developments, and in particular their impact on smaller organisations, necessitate support for employers from motivated, well-trained reps. The training offer proposed by the GFTU was to enable reps to gain generic and specialised training in all distinct equalities areas - like age, deaf awareness, race, religion, disability, gender, LGBT. We seek to support reps who wish to have a specific focus in their work, since evidence still strongly supports, for example, continued inequalities in pay and promotion for women, disproportionate numbers of black and minority ethnic

workers that are disciplined, and the continued reluctance of employers to employ workers with disabilities.’

The GFTU did already deliver some training with an equalities focus, which sits within a broader, general reps’ training programme. A similar situation prevailed in Connect. But the UMF funding was crucial to enable the unions to launch such an ambitious national strategic project with a singular focus on the development of the equality reps’ role. Judith Jackson highlights significant benefits:

‘The UMF funding enabled the GFTU to develop the new courses, have them accredited and deliver them over a two-year period. Once course writing and accreditation activity had been undertaken, and the associated costs met by the UMF, they were available on a continued basis to affiliates. The two-year delivery allowed us to pilot and modify these courses. Within Connect, the project meant they could develop the specific equality reps’ role, rather than simply having training on equalities within their general workplace reps’ education. (Connect could only hitherto offer one equalities-specific course per year.)’

Aims and objectives

The GFTU identified a number of advantages that would result from this project. It would:

- help to ensure a greater diversity of trade union reps and a more representative reflection of the demography of trade union membership, particularly in relation to race and gender
- enable significant transformational change in the way the specific issues of key groups of workers are represented across the trade union bargaining agenda,

- putting equalities at the centre of all negotiating activity
- significantly transform current trade union practice around equalities by enabling the sharing of good practice across trade unions through the establishment of a national equality reps network
- enable the establishment of internal networks for all the GFTU affiliates
- bring about a significant transformational change as a result of the direct input of the equality commissions and Stonewall, in that ‘the new cohort of reps would be witness to the movement to a single equality commission (Equality & Human Rights Commission) and be highly well placed thereafter to maintain strong links with this body and ensure that their employer follows developments led by the EHRC. All equality reps’ training pre- and post- the creation of EHRC would involve the commissions and reflect their national priorities’.

Methodology

The project set out to:

- recruit and train 140 new workplace equality reps
- develop accredited taught courses and an online educational model
- develop a national equality reps’ network
- publish an employers’ good practice guide on implementing workplace equality measures, using case studies based on the experiences of trained equality reps.

The training

The equality reps’ training offer comprised:

- a minimum (during 2007-2009) of six weekends residential courses (three a year) for Stage I and follow-on Stage II. Stage I provision developed the reps' understanding of statutory equalities issues and their awareness of how to apply positive measures to support the needs of workers and of how to develop workplace policy and procedure to adopt national standards and statutory duties. In the Stage II courses, they developed their understanding of distinct equality themes, such as HIV/AIDS in the workplace, and deaf awareness
- a minimum of 14 one-day issue-based seminars in various locations (themed and run in partnership with Stonewall and EHRC where possible). These were highly specialist, drawing in guest speakers and focusing on good practice around, for example, supporting migrant workers, and implementing new legislation such as age regulations.

The training revolved around a series of tasks and activities, with a strong focus on equalities issues within their own union as much as for their own workplace. This included, for example, the creation of a national GFTU equalities reps' network and the adoption of the equalities good practice guide produced as a result of the project.

Judith Jackson continues:

'Whilst a large proportion of the recruited equality reps undertook two-day face-to-face taught training sessions, with a selection of short seminars across the UK, the project also offered an innovative online, flexible model of learning which would

mirror the taught training offer. Both options were available through the development of new, specialist materials and both offered accreditation. Online delivery of reps training in this way was a new development for Connect and the GFTU and gave us the opportunity to test the feasibility of delivering other union training online. Whilst this element was specifically delivered in partnership with Connect, all other GFTU affiliates were invited to participate in all areas of the project.'

Equality reps' network

Over the two years of the project, equality reps were supported through a new equality reps' network, the main purpose of which is to share information between reps and maintain their focus and momentum. Alongside this for the purposes of sustainability, the GFTU also worked with all its affiliates on the adoption and maintenance of their own internal equality reps' networks.

Good practice guide

A critically significant outcome of the project's work was the production of the definitive good practice guide on working with employers around managing workplace diversity. The guide was informed by the new EHRC, which was a partner to its publication. It draws on the experience of equality reps and showcases a variety of employer partnerships that have resulted in strong, positive approaches to managing diversity.

Monitoring and evaluation

A key component of the GFTU's monitoring and evaluation strategy was the way that newly trained equality reps fed into the monitoring and evaluation process – not just with evidence of their activity, but also of how their training was qualitatively affecting employer and trade union practices. Each new cohort of reps was issued with hard and electronic

copy monitoring forms, on which they could summarise their activity each quarter. Freepost envelopes and email were used to return them for collation. This information was also useful for the national network meetings. Interim evaluations were submitted to the project steering group. An external evaluator was appointed, who:

- undertook a detailed evaluation of the project's first training exercise
- distributed a training questionnaire to all equality reps undertaking the training
- attended all project steering group meetings and a sample of Stage I and Stage II courses
- attended all meetings of the equality reps' network.

Outcomes

In both quantitative and qualitative measures the project has proved an overriding success. Course and event feedback consistently featured positive comments on how the project had been managed and that materials had been well produced. Key milestones were met, in particular in the development of training materials and the roll-out of the core training programmes.

The vast majority of student feedback highlighted the significant extent to which the training met expectations and supported ongoing need through the training resources and the employers' guide to equalities. Judith Jackson adds:

'Partnership arrangements also appeared to work well in all circumstances and provided added value - for example, with the contribution of the EHRC and Thompson's Solicitors to the development of teaching materials and support with training delivery.'

Training equality reps

The GFTU trained a total of 165 equality reps, a significant increase on its target. This success is attributed to:

- strategic marketing exercises, which identified activists with an interest in equality
- the combination of Stage I and Stage II options, which feedback showed as providing a robust framework, sufficient to attract enrolment
- the range of speakers from specialist agencies (also identified as important to enrolment)
- the use of the network to maintain contact between reps (seen as helpful in the transition between Stage I and Stage II courses).

Residential courses

Because of increasing demand, the GFTU delivered the training through a total of 11 residential workshops, as opposed to the six originally proposed. Feedback showed that students particularly valued:

- being given key strategies to improve workplace equality issues
- the excellent teacher and very good resources
- the opportunity to work with other reps in a similar situation.

One-day seminars

The GFTU ran 13 seminars (rather than the 14 hoped for). Nevertheless, each had a highly skilled specialist and a qualified range of teachers and speakers.

Equality reps' network

Three network meetings were run (although the number of attendees was disappointingly low). These were supplemented by email alerts on issues of direct relevance to equality reps, and an online discussion forum.

Dissemination event

Sixty two people attended the GFTU's project dissemination event in Telford. Says Judith: 'This national high profile event allowed the GFTU to showcase the successful, innovative work that is being undertaken by equality reps trained as part of the project.'

Employers' guide

The 60-page guide, focusing on key equalities issues for employers and trade unions, was launched at the dissemination event and, says Judith Jackson, 'has proved a valuable aid for the ongoing programme of training around equalities generally and for equality reps in particular'.

Lessons learned

The following lessons were highlighted:

- The most consistently weak area of project activity relates to the development of the online model for the delivery of equality rep training. Judith explains: 'While this aspect of the project was requested by the GFTU's project partner, Connect, and based on their activists' proclivity to use e-based communication, this did not manifest itself in sufficient interest from Connect reps, or from other GFTU affiliates.'
- Evaluation feedback identified that some equality reps were concerned about the relatively slow pace at which their union was adopting structures that required their new position in the union. 'While this is not a project-specific weakness it does have the potential to limit long-term sustainability of project outcomes.'
- Employers seemed reluctant to give equality reps the time off to train or pursue their role. Although the network meetings

were part of the project they were not seen by employers as formal training and as such it was difficult to secure paid release to attend. Additionally, as the network meetings were not accredited, they could not be identified formally as an aspect of reps' training, so were not eligible for paid release. 'A longer-term recommendation is that networking activity should be embedded as a feature of training activity, encompassed by legislation that prescribes reasons for a trade union rep gaining paid release.'

During testing, the electronic resource proved to be a sophisticated, fluid mirror of its taught version, yet it did not attract particularly high numbers - only 11 students enrolled.

Looking ahead

The GFTU will continue to maintain the profile of its work with equality reps across its affiliates, not least to support their efforts to develop structures that support this role. As Judith explains, the union also plans to:

- continue to provide a framework of training for equality reps within its annual core programme. 'This must remain in place to provide sustainability.'
- consider an option of testing, via learning needs analysis, any future trends in the demand for e-based learning to determine the value of developing this as an option for learners. 'Whilst the few trained by the online model do feature as part of the overall training cohort, the online model did not realise a significantly high degree of participation. Positively, the online model

remains in use and of value to the GFTU and we will continue to offer this model.'

- share information and good practice arising from the project with other, non-affiliate, small and specialist trade unions, particularly as these unions often lack the capacity or finance to engage in this work
- train activists in issues around deaf awareness and sign language. 'We see this as an essential addition to the range of options available and a significant wider benefit of the project.'

full and proper implementation on relatively newer equalities issues around age, sexual orientation and religion and belief. Ultimately this project will enable small, specialist trade unions to significantly shift the position of equality and diversity as a workplace bargaining issue and support the role of well trained, confident reps in negotiating change that supports the needs of trade union members.'

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Conclusion

Judith Jackson is delighted with the potential that this project has unleashed:

'As a result of their training, equality reps will be able to work in partnership with their employers to adopt national good practice standards and maintain a high profile of the equalities agenda on a long-term sustainable basis. The project will also transform trade union practice by ensuring that the reps' training (and specific work undertaken by reps within their own union thereafter) can be linked to national equality-specific events such as International Women's Day, Black History Month, and Pride. Similarly, these reps will be well placed to support their unions and employers in safeguarding the needs of migrant workers. For example, equality reps and union learning reps will be able to collaborate on negotiations with an employer on access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education. An essential wider and critical benefit is in enabling reps to shape a new, modern focus on workplace and trade union equalities priorities within a newer perspective on human rights. Similarly, these new reps will be well placed to ensure the

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