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UNISON learning & organising services **briefing number 6**

Public services: Learning Yes, Cutbacks No

The coalition government is using the financial crisis caused by reckless private sector financial activity to launch its disastrous attempt to lay waste to our public services.

Ministers talk as if it was excessive public expenditure that got us into trouble in the first place, when it is clear that it was the banks and big corporations that dug us into this enormous hole, and public spending that staved off an even bigger crisis.

UNISON's Million Voices for Public Services campaign wants changes that put people before profit and public interest before private greed.

Of course, deficits need to be reduced over time, but the headlong rush to balance the books is not only economically counter-productive, but also dramatically increases hardship across the country. In the post-credit crunch era, over 100,000 homes have been repossessed, more than 1 million workers have lost their jobs, and over one in three employees have had their pay, hours or benefits cut.

The truth is that now is the time to invest in a range of vital services to support our economic recovery – and that includes learning, skills and training.

After all, the UK Commission on Education and Skills estimates we need another 100,000 education staff by 2017 to ensure we develop the skilled workforce the economy needs.

In addition to that, we also need to ensure that enterprises do not slash and burn their training budgets in a panic reaction to financial problems: after all, developing skills will not only help individual workers or groups of workers – studies show that a skilled workforce is not only more motivated but also more productive.

That's why union learning reps have an even more important role to play in the difficult times ahead, by helping encourage members to improve their employability skills through the wide range of courses on offer from UNISON, unionlearn and the TUC.

Case study: West Midlands

UNISON West Midlands has been working closely with the Birmingham Local Government and West Midlands Fire Services branches to help members improve their skills through workplace learning.

Regional Learning and Development Organiser Gurdeep Singh and Birmingham Branch Education Officer (and social services learning rep) Donald McCombie are jointly promoting courses to help social services members enhance their skills.

“Donald and I have been working together to get the best deal for members in this area, and both members and managers have been viewing UNISON in a more positive light as a result,” Gurdeep explains.

In the current climate of economic uncertainty, the region has been encouraging all its members to think about how the union may be able to improve their skills for the future.

“This climate makes what we do even more important – there's a greater demand for what we already do, and more members are interested in looking at the wider portfolio of courses available through the union, including our partnership with The Open University (OU),” says Gurdeep.

With Gurdeep's support, West Midlands Fire Service Branch Education Officer John Routley has encouraged over 40 members onto Openings courses on a range of subjects with The Open University; and UNISON's partnership with the OU means members get the chance to attend three free face-to-face study skills

sessions with OU tutors to help them get the most out of their Openings course.

In addition, the region has also put together a series of four-day courses to help members enhance a crucial range of employability skills:

- descriptions, person Workplace Recruitment and Selection Skills examines job specifications, CVs, application processes and interviews.
- Computers and ICT for Beginners covers introductory mouse/keyboard skills, word processing, internet and email.
- Intermediate ICT and Computing covers Word, managing email accounts, searching online and an introduction to spreadsheets and databases.

“We respond to what our members are asking for – where we think there is a need for specific groups of staff who may have been issued with notices of redundancy or are aware that change is on the way, that’s where we try to help,” Gurdeep says.

“We might use existing off-the-shelf courses, but if members ask for a one-day workshop on a specific subject such as interview technique we’ll try and help with that – there’s no one-size-fits-all approach.”

What ULRs can do

- Make sure your branch gets involved in UNISON’s Million Voices campaigning. For campaign briefings and resources to download visit www.unison.org.uk/million/branch-resources.php
- Talk to your branch secretary and ensure that members facing redundancy get the chance to improve their job skills through courses run by UNISON, unionlearn or the TUC. For information on the short sessions on Supporting Members through Redundancy and other informal adult learning that UNISON is putting together contact Joanna Cain j.cain@unison.co.uk.
- Speak to your Regional Learning and Development Organiser: there may be existing courses available for members, but where there’s a gap in provision, RLDOs are in the best position to discuss members’ needs with partner organisations such as the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) or

other providers.

- Alert your employer to the concrete ways in which UNISON can help staff facing redundancy: given the union’s depth of experience and range of contacts in this area, employers should always factor in how UNISON can help, and work together with the union to support employees coping with redundancy or redeployment (for instance, by providing paid release to attend courses).
- Organise financial literacy sessions and courses for members to help them get to grips with a range of money issues. The Consumer Financial Education Body offers a free hour-long seminar, given by a specially trained presenter, together with a free supporting guide for everyone who attends. Find out more at: www.cfebuk.org.uk/our-work/workplace/
- Unionlearn’s Skills: Recession and Recovery project works with unions to identify areas and sectors under threat and help union members learn new skills to either avoid redundancy or put themselves in a better position to find new work when the economy recovers. A full list of Regional Development Workers can be found on the website: www.unionlearn.org.uk/initiatives/index.cfm?mins=173

Find out more

- UNISON’s alternative budget www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/18887.pdf
- Don’t forget the spending cuts! The real impact of Budget 2010. Briefing paper by Tim Horton and Howard Reed from the TUC/UNISON research project Standing Up For Public Services www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/B5131.pdf
- Million Voices campaign www.unison.org.uk/million/branch-news.php
- Redundancy Handbook www.moneymadeclear.org.uk/redundancy

Supporting members through Redundancy

For information on Supporting Members through Redundancy and other informal adult learning sessions that UNISON is developing contact Joanna Cain j.cain@unison.co.uk.