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## UNISON Learning & Organising services briefing number 7

### Defending Members with Skills for Life Needs

When UNISON members face disciplinary action (or the threat of disciplinary action) because they seem to have refused to carry out instructions, follow new rules or adhere to health and safety policies, Skills for Life (SfL) issues can often be at the root of the problem.

The trouble is that workers with poor literacy or numeracy have almost always developed coping strategies, such as pretending to lose their glasses when required to read something or carrying magazines around to give the impression they don't have reading problems.

These strategies are often so successful that it doesn't occur to managers that workers are not following instructions simply because they don't know what those instructions are and it's up to union reps to see that they get help with their literacy, numeracy or ICT issues.

#### Case study:

#### Kettering Healthcare Branch

Kettering Healthcare Branch Secretary Ian Kelly has supported a number of members whose Skills for Life issues were behind their disciplinary problems.

"I don't know anybody who comes into work to get into trouble on purpose – I don't think I've ever met anyone like that the whole time I've been working," he says.

"But when you get talking to people, you find out that they didn't get learning opportunities as a child – there can be lots of reasons why they didn't attend school all the time, such as being the oldest child who had to look after their

younger siblings so they missed out on schooling."

The problem is that the world of work has changed, he points out – health and safety legislation has developed, computer skills are increasingly necessary, and many workers are nowadays expected to undertake tasks that would have been left to supervisors before.

All that means that workers with SfL issues can come under increasing pressure in today's workplace – and union reps need to be on the lookout for tell-tale signs which could point to them needing help.

"The more I got involved with learning when I trained as a ULR, the more I started to spot things – like seeing one person reading a newspaper to a group of four or five people in the canteen, or seeing how some people are resistant to change because it challenges their learning issues," he says.

When members have become involved in disciplinary problems that are rooted in SfL issues, Ian has been careful to raise two key issues: appraisal and communication.

"During disciplinaries, I always check whether literacy issues have been mentioned in a person's appraisal, because if they have, it's up to the manager to help that person tackle those issues," he says.

"I also ask how polices have been made available – often managers say they expect staff to read everything they put in a communications book, but they don't take into account the literacy level they might be required to understand a new policy."

While it can be stressful for members to face up to SfL problems in the middle of a disciplinary

process, Ian has seen some members commit to developing themselves as a result because the issues have been handled effectively.

“The focus and attention on them as individuals has allowed them to go away and get some training and they’ve blossomed – all of a sudden it’s like an Aladdin’s cave has been opened up to them and they have this opportunity to make a difference to their careers and make a difference in their whole lives,” he says.

### **Skills for Life as an Organising Issue**

As many as 100,000 UNISON members could become more active in their branches if the union worked with employers to help them develop their Skills for Life, according to preliminary results from the union’s SfL survey.

More than 27,000 UNISON members completed the SfL survey, and headline results show:

- 8 per cent of respondents felt that their lack of confidence in literacy, numeracy and computing skills stopped them reading union material and taking part in meetings;
- 16 per cent believed poor literacy, numeracy and computing skills stopped them applying for promotion;.
- more than 50 per cent said they would be interested in improving their literacy, numeracy or computing skills.

“From this sample alone, we may be missing out on more than 2,000 new activists: if that’s reflected across the whole union, it could be up to 100,000 people who currently lack the confidence to get involved, to read the information we send out or to do something like write to their MP about the cuts,” says Davinder Sandhu, Learning & Workforce Development Officer (Skills for Life Lead).

Communications issues are central: one in five say they find speaking in groups difficult and one in eight find speaking to the public at work difficult, so they’re not going to turn up at meetings or if they do, they’re unlikely to feel confident enough to offer an opinion.

Good numeracy skills can help reps with a range of tasks, one rep pointed out: “I tend to ask a more numerate colleague to help when I am asked to help members with problems with their pay with this. It would also help in

understanding the financial reports provided by our employer for information.”

Another member had given up the steward’s role because of poor communications skills and low self-confidence. “I did take on the role as a UNISON steward for a while, but I didn’t feel that I had the ability to talk/listen to another person and stand up to managers: I believe UNISON needs stewards with more self-confidence.”

### **What Branches Can Do**

- Negotiating learning agreements with specific reference to support for Skills for Life (SfL) learning remains crucial. ULRs should also discuss the SfL survey with employers, since it confirms there is a major appetite for SfL learning among UNISON members.
- While public spending cuts have reduced funding for adult learning, there are still free literacy and numeracy courses available in local colleges and independent providers.
- Branches should monitor communication of performance policies, health and safety instructions and other management communications: pinning notices on noticeboards, inserting in communications folders or posting on staff intranets can exclude workers with SfL issues.
- Branches can point out that employers benefit from investing in the literacy, numeracy and computer skills of their workforce. Filling vacancies by external appointment is usually more expensive than internal promotion, yet the survey shows that tens of thousands of union members exclude themselves from possible progression in the workplace on account of their SfL issues.

#### **Find out more**

For more information about Skills for Life, contact UNISON Learning & Workforce Development Officer, Davinder Sandhu.

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