Celebrating
the power of learning
with UNISON College

LEARN
2024

Give your skills
a helping hand



UNISON

UNISON College

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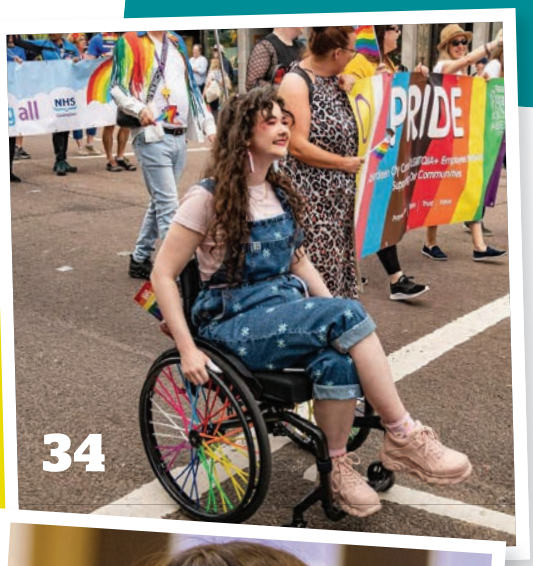
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You can change your world



I'm immensely proud of how UNISON College continues to expand our commitment to training and learning since I announced its creation two years ago.

The stories in this year's ULearn showcase how our members and activists are being empowered to increase their knowledge, skills, career-development and confidence. UNISON College plays a pivotal role in enhancing our union, both individually and collectively.

As is clear from these pages, the learning opportunities for our members and activists are being strengthened and enriched.

From highlighting some of our brilliant union learning reps, to celebrating the learning and training during last year's Year of Black Workers, and this year's Year of LGBT+ Workers, the magazine is packed with fascinating stories from across our regions, service groups and self-organised groups.

> **"Whether you're new to UNISON College or have already experienced some of its amazing learning and training opportunities, I hope these pages inspire you"**

Whether you're new to UNISON College or have already experienced some of its amazing learning and training opportunities, I hope these pages inspire you to get more involved, because, in the words of Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Christina McAnea
General Secretary



UNISON College

What is UNISON College?

UNISON College provides member learning and activist training opportunities for all members across the union.

UNISON College helps members and activists develop their skills through a mix of in-person, online, blended and self-study opportunities.

Your regional learning team organises opportunities as part of their learning and education programmes for activists and members.

You can also access the opportunities that the national team delivers or commissions that are open to members and activists across the union.

As UNISON College isn't a building, the courses take place in regional offices, employers' premises, learning centres and online. Courses can be delivered by UNISON staff or external providers.

Please check out the learning and training opportunities on offer, as there's something for everyone! And please feel free to get in touch. ✱

What can I learn as a member?

UNISON College offers more than 1,000 different courses, modules, events, workshops and webinars.

We can help you get to grips with Excel and spreadsheets. We can improve your job interview skills. We can give you the tools you need to keep on top of your finances. And we can help you deal with the challenges of everyday life through mindfulness and other stress-busting techniques.

But there are way more courses than we can list here. To find out more, visit:
learning.unison.org.uk/member-learning/



Explore the power of learning

This ULearn celebrates the power and impact of learning. New skills, new knowledge, new confidence. All delivered through UNISON College's national and regional education teams and via the network of union learning reps (ULRs).

UNISON College exists to empower all our members and activists with both personal and professional development.

We provide a broad range of courses, workshops and events so that every member – whatever their level of experience or interest – can enjoy the benefits of our education offer.

Over the last year, thousands of members across the UK took advantage of our learning and training opportunities.

I hope the many stories in this edition of ULearn also inspire you to explore and find out more.

Sarah Hayes,
Head of Learning and Organising

How does the College support activists?

When you volunteer to take on a union role in your local branch, UNISON College offers the training you'll need to carry out that role with confidence.

We can introduce you to the role of a steward or workplace rep in organising members at local level. We can show you how to support your members as a health and safety rep. And we can help you develop the knowledge and skills you need to take on branch roles like welfare officer, LGBT+ officer or green rep.

We can also help you develop as an activist through courses on advanced employment law, sector-specific issues and mental health first aid and many more.

To view the full range of activists training opportunities, visit: **learning.unison.org.uk/activist-training/**

How do I promote learning in UNISON?

Many members get so much out of what they learn through UNISON College that they want to help spread the message to other branch members and potential members in their workplace.

We can train you to become a union learning rep (ULR). We also offer specialist training on issues like dyslexia, mentoring or dementia awareness. And we can equip you for taking on wider roles like branch education coordinator or lifelong learning coordinator.

To find out more about supporting learning, visit: **learning.unison.org.uk/supporting-learning/**

What opportunities do you want to explore? There's more useful information, including more web links and QR codes, at the end of this magazine

"Your regional learning team organises opportunities as part of their learning and education programmes"

Growing through learning and training



© JESS HURD

Social care workers in the private and non-profit sectors are gaining the skills to organise through a new union project in Scotland.

UNISON Scotland is successfully building union presence and power in social care by delivering tailor-made organising stewards courses for members working for the sector's private and charitable employers.

The project aims to grow UNISON strength as the Scottish government prepares to introduce sectoral bargaining throughout the sector, where private and non-profit sector providers make up roughly two-thirds of employers.

"This project is about making sure that workers are as well organised as they can be, with a strong voice that actually results in improvements to their pay and conditions," explains Regional Organiser (Education) Jennifer McCarey.

The course is delivered through a mix of online and in-person sessions to make it as straightforward as possible for care workers to take part.

The first four sessions are run twice a week at different times to increase accessibility for shift workers, while the group then completes the final two modules in-person over the course of a Saturday to build their connections with each other.

"We get to know the individual members before the course and take care to make sure they've got everything they need," Jennifer says.

"We send them packs so they don't have to rely on looking at screens and we make sure they've got the tech support they need or if they need the branch to supply a laptop or an iPad for the course."

The online sessions are designed to match the experience of being on an in-person UNISON course, Jennifer says.

"We're building a movement and it's got to feel like that, so we put a lot of effort into making the online sessions fun and dynamic"

"We're building a movement and it's got to feel like that, so we put a lot of effort into making the online sessions fun and dynamic and person-centred, where people are looked after and learning from each other," she says.

"We all need to build a community of social care workers because working with people is their bread and butter so training should be a welcoming, friendly support environment."

The first time the project ran the organising stewards course earlier this year, the results were



Supporting schools staff

UNISON College is helping members and activists in multi-academy trusts (MATs) in England improve their skills as part of the union's Organising to Win project.

The College has developed five short member learning workshops that organisers working with the targeted schools can run for members: Power to be You; Your Skills, Your Future; Staying Strong; Time Management; and Communicating for Success.

"We want to use the learning agenda to encourage more members to get active in the union," explains National Education Officer Jane Shepherd.

If you're a UNISON member in a MAT, get in touch with your regional learning team to find out more about the member learning workshops.

"Please take the time to speak with organisers and branch colleagues who are visiting schools to find out about how you can build a stronger union in your workplace and access member learning opportunities for you and for your colleagues," says National Strategic Organising Unit National Organiser Kalvinder Tiwana.

If you don't work in a MAT, you can still develop yourself through UNISON College workshops and CPD sessions; plus the Skills Academy online courses.

remarkable, with seven of the eight members who completed becoming stewards.

Three of the new stewards who worked for Enable, Scotland's largest charity for people with learning disabilities, threw themselves into the consultative ballot on pay that UNISON was conducting at the provider.

"They immediately helped build a ballot response among the membership, who voted 89 per cent to reject the pay offer and 85 per cent in favour of strike action, so had an immediate impact," Jennifer says.

With every social care employer targeted by the project, the team creates a closed Facebook group that only members can join, as well as a reps' committee.

The project has now set its sights on Scotland's largest care provider, Richmond Fellowship, which doesn't yet recognise UNISON. So the team is looking to add an additional module to the course to help new reps build their presence in non-union employers.

"We'll also be able to use that module as a standalone session for people at non-union employers in the sector who want to find out how to unionise," Jennifer explains. ✱

Developing new Black leaders

Sonia Stewart is using the leadership skills she gained on a National Black Members' Committee course to support more Black activists in her region.



Manchester Branch Assistant Branch Secretary Sonia Stewart has been supporting the next generation of Black leaders in the North West since taking part in UNISON's Developing Your Leadership Skills course last year.

"The branch does encourage Black members to develop as far as they can, including becoming stewards," says Sonia, who is also Branch Equalities Officer.

"I've already helped members get involved in the regional Black Members' Committee, so the next step would be to encourage them to be elected onto the National Black Members' Committee (NBMC) when the time comes," she says.

Sonia got a great deal out of the leadership skills course, both from the tutors' presentations and from interactions with the other members of the NBMC who took part.

"It was great because people came from all over the country and you could hear about their perspectives, the experiences that they've had and examples of good practice," she says.

"It was great because people came from all over the country"

"We had good healthy discussions when we were working together but there was also time for everyone to give our views on issues as individuals."

Sonia found it very useful to be introduced to different models of leadership and change on the course.

For example, the House of Change tool uses the metaphor of a house with a basement, ground floor and upper floor to show how people can progress from feelings of despair, confusion and denial to renewal and contentment.

"I'd not come across this before – this was a new bit of learning for me," Sonia says.

Sonia thought that the Cultural Iceberg model was another fruitful way to think about organisational cultures.

"The Cultural Iceberg is about the way we say we get things done and the way we really get things done," Sonia explains.

"When some organisations are challenged, they say, 'We've got this policy in place, we've got that procedure in place', but they don't think beyond the tick-box. How



do you apply it? How do you promote it? Does everyone understand it? Do you get feedback about the policy? How often is it reviewed? What impact has it had?" *

"You can't let your colour or the fact that you're a woman get in the way"

Aiming higher

Guy's & St Thomas' Branch Workplace Rep Marie Marquis is all set to complete her Business and Management degree with The Open University (OU) this summer.

"When I was young, my mother couldn't afford for me to go to university," says Marie, who works as an IT trainer at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Trust in London.

"So when I saw this come up in lockdown, I thought, 'Let me take this opportunity now that I'm older'."

In her role as workplace rep, Marie is always encouraging members to take up learning and training opportunities through the union, just as she has herself.

And as someone who has built a long and successful career in the male-dominated world of IT, Marie believes it's important not to let barriers get in the way of what you want to achieve.

"You can do whatever it is you want to do, if you really put your mind to it," she says. "You can't let your colour or the fact that you're a woman get in the way."

Marie, who has worked in the NHS for 19 years, says she's gained a lot from studying with the OU over the past three years.

"Sometimes it's been really difficult but it's given me a lot of management skills and time management skills," she says.



Spreading the message about UNISON College

Sheffield Branch activist Camilla Sherwin has developed her skills by learning through the union – and now she's encouraging more members to follow in her footsteps.

Sheffield Local Government Branch activist Camilla Sherwin is so passionate about learning that she opted to become a union learning rep last year.

Although she already had several other roles in the branch, Camilla was keen to spread the message about learning opportunities to her members.

"I love training, I love learning, and I don't think people realise the full range of learning that's on offer through the union," she says.

Camilla wants to make

"Learning can be something completely outside the realm of your work that could lead you in a different direction"

sure that branch members who aren't employed by the local authority enjoy the same learning opportunities as those who are.

"South Yorkshire Fire & Rescue are part of our branch, and they've got a big network of people who would really benefit from the learning offer that UNISON's got on the table," she says.

One of the barriers to getting more UNISON members to sign up for learning opportunities through the union is the way many of them think about learning and training in narrow, task-focused ways, Camilla says.

"When people think about training, they think it's something they do if they need to use Microsoft Word," she says.

"But learning can be something completely outside the realm of your work that could lead you in a different direction – and that's what attracted me to start doing courses through the union."

Camilla enrolled on an NCFE Level 2 Principles of Team Leading course two years ago because she wanted to give herself more options if she ever had to look for other work.

Juggling work and home life with her activist roles (she's also a convenor, health and safety rep, communications officer and a steward), Camilla found the flexibility of distance learning suited her.

"This isn't just a union thing: it's good for the council to upskill the workforce and improve retention"

"Because distance learning is in your own time, I might do a bit at lunch while I'm working, or a bit while I'm in the car waiting for the little one to come out of school, so it fits in with whatever you're doing," she says.

"And it's very adapted to your own style of learning – and my style is to crack on and do it in a corner somewhere because I'm a bit of a loner when it comes to learning!"

Camilla found the tutor support over email very helpful as she worked her way through the 11 assignments that comprised the coursework.

"The tutor was as involved or as little involved as you wanted and they gave me feedback saying where I needed to expand my responses," she says.

"Overall, it was a really good experience – I definitely need to enrol on something else! I've thought about doing a counselling skills course, which would also help me in my union roles."

The knowledge and skills she acquired on the course have proved very useful since she was also elected as joint branch secretary, where she has to manage the three admin workers and two case workers employed by the branch.

To further spread the word about learning opportunities through UNISON (and the GMB and Unite, the two other unions recognised by Sheffield City Council), Camilla is keen to negotiate a learning agreement.

"I'm working to try and get a learning agreement signed with Sheffield City Council and get learning back on the agenda and promote the opportunities available through all the unions," Camilla says.

"This isn't just a union thing: it's good for the council to upskill the workforce and improve retention, so I'm really hoping I can get somewhere – if I've got an idea, I don't like to stop until it's done!" ✱

Building more inclusive workplaces

Members across Cambridgeshire are learning about a range of ways to improve the working lives of people experiencing menopause at their branch's monthly online sessions.



Members in local government, health, schools and elsewhere across Cambridgeshire and beyond have been expanding their knowledge of all aspects of menopause through an online menopause café run by the Cambridgeshire County Branch.

Launched in January 2022, the café has covered a broad spectrum of menopause issues, including employment rights, exercise, diet, overcoming stereotyping, sex life, HRT and alternative therapies.

"Most training sessions are open to all, including managers and colleagues and relatives or friends wishing to offer support – we believe that menopause is an issue for everyone," says Branch Education Coordinator and Union Learning Rep (ULR) Bess Sayers, who facilitates the café.

"But some discussion sessions are only open to people experiencing menopause and menopausal symptoms, including trans people, to allow participants to share stories and offer each other mutual support in a confidential space."

With attendance steadily rising since the launch, the branch paid for Bess to complete an accredited Menopause Awareness Diploma Course, with the Centre of Excellence online learning provider.

"I tried to finish it as quickly as I could to help the menopause café, so it took about two months of doing it in lunch breaks and evenings in the end – I thought, 'I'm going to get this done' because I knew it was desperately needed," she says.

Having completed the diploma helps Bess deliver many of the sessions herself. The branch also pays for external speakers to share their knowledge of specialist subjects such as dietary advice, pharmacy support, alternative

"No two people have the same journey with menopause – it's completely different for everyone"



therapies and meditation.

On average, around a dozen members take part every month but as many as 40 people logged on to one session.

To build on the success of the café, Bess helped draw up a menopause policy for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), where she works as a public transport manager.

With the policy now in place, CPCA has paid for Bess and two colleagues to undertake Menopause Champion Training with leading training provider Henpicked. The three have already delivered awareness sessions across the CPCA and are planning more this year. ✱

Breaking down barriers

Dozens of UNISON members across Yorkshire & Humberside have been expanding their knowledge of the impact of menopause in the workplace through well-attended online workshops in the region.

Open to everyone, the sessions aim to help participants improve their understanding of menopause issues, from its impact on relationships, work and mental and physical health to the best ways to minimise symptoms and stay healthy.

"It's not death-by-PowerPoint – there's always lots of questions and lots of discussion," says Claire Leader, the qualified nurse and midwife who delivers the workshops.

Helping people get together to discuss all aspects of menopause is vital to breaking down barriers, Claire says.

"It does have an impact on people's ability to do their jobs at certain points – they might get brain fog or anxiety and depression, so employers need to be aware of this – it's huge."

Demand remains high whenever the region runs the workshops. "We've never had less than 20 people but for the last one last November we had around 45 participants, which was brilliant," she says.

Claire says she always enjoys delivering the sessions because of the participants' honesty and openness

"I get people experiencing perimenopause to post-menopause and everything in between and I really enjoy hearing them share their experiences with each other and giving each other support," she says. "It's all about the participants – they're very much at the centre of it."



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Helping staff navigate major change

Southampton ULR Chris Hallett has organised a series of fun learning opportunities to boost staff wellbeing that she calls ‘UNISON Hug Sessions’.

Southampton District Branch Union Learning Rep Chris Hallett has organised a series of fun learning opportunities designed to help boost staff wellbeing during a time of change at the city council.

Chris calls her Christmas gift swaps, windowsill gardening and stone-painting get-togethers ‘UNISON Hug Sessions’ because she hopes they will lift people’s spirits during the upheavals caused by service

“Hopefully they give council staff ‘a hug’ at a stressful time for people”

restructuring at Southampton City Council and the wider financial struggles facing all local authorities.

"Hopefully they give council staff a 'hug' at a stressful time for people," says Chris, who trained as a ULR last year after three years as branch education coordinator (BEC).

The first UNISON Hug session was a post-Christmas gift swap, which gave people the chance to exchange unwanted presents for things they needed and have a chat with branch officers about the latest developments at the council.

"I set up a gift swap or donate table outside the branch office, so that people could drop off the pink socks they didn't want and go home with a diary they needed, and we also did a food bank box as well for the food left over in the cupboard," Chris explains.

"The gift swap also gave people the opportunity to talk to us about everything that's going on at the council, and we did pick up new members as well."

Chris followed that up early in the new year with an Introduction to Your Family Tree lunch and learn in the council archives that attracted more than a dozen participants.

"The archives gave us some staff and a room for two hours where you could drop in with your laptop and your lunch and learn how to do your family tree," she says.

"The feedback was all positive, and we signed up a couple of new members from the training, which is a bonus!"

Next up will be a windowsill gardening and seed swap lunch and learn.

"People don't always have a garden but most people have a windowsill where they could grow herbs or baby tomatoes," Chris says.

Chris is also looking to organise a session on the increasingly popular craft activity of stone-painting.

The session will give participants the chance to decorate stones they can keep or leave around their local areas to be discovered by others.

As branch education coordinator, Chris is involved in all the training undertaken in the branch. "I'll make sure people are on the right course for them and I'll help if they want all the resources in paper form rather than online, as that's easier for some," she says.

"Two years ago, we had a rep who was going to do an online training course on her phone because it was the only thing she had available, so I sorted out an old laptop for her to borrow while she was on the course."

Last year, Chris was approached by library staff who wanted support with looking after the needs of the full range of people using the library – including those coming in primarily for the warmth.

Chris worked with the regional education team to put together a set of four online sessions, which covered issues including neurodiversity and self-care.

"We did the training on self-care so staff weren't going home after work worrying about the person they've left who's just told them they haven't got anywhere else to go to," she says.

"The feedback was all positive, from members and non-members – and we signed up a couple of new members from the training, which is a bonus!"

Chris agrees that there's a strong thread of positivity about her approach to promoting learning. "Well, that's the plan: there's no point in having a thread of negativity – there's enough of that in the world!" she laughs. ✱



Developing the next generation

Young members in the North West are becoming active in their branches thanks to the training available through their regional young members network.



The North West young members forum is helping young members in the region get active in their branches and across the union through its commitment to training.

"Our regional young members network provides good support for young activists who are involved in their branches," says committee member and former chair Micaela Tracey-Ramos, who's also a workplace rep in Liverpool City Branch.

"We've done a lot of training on how to get active in your branch and in your workplace, and we've focused on organising and getting people more confident to go back to their workplace and use those skills."

Micaela was one of three young members in the region who worked together to revive the network after joining UNISON when she started working for Wirral Council a couple of years ago (she now works for Liverpool City Council).

"The young members network has gone through periods of activity and inactivity, so me and two other people decided, 'Let's get it active again'," she recalls.

In addition to focusing on organising, the network has consistently engaged young members in many of the bigger political issues of the day at its annual political schools.

Micaela says she wasn't a ready-made organiser when she became a workplace rep in her previous job at Wirral Council. She's honed her own organising skills

through a combination of training courses, practical experience and support.

"I went on the first national organising school, where we heard from different organisers and about the Organising to Win strategy, which was good," she says.

"In the North West, we have a great learning and organising department that run North West Organising Academies, which I found very useful, especially in terms of getting people involved."

Micaela's also a firm believer in learning by doing. "The courses are good – don't get me wrong: you can't do anything without the training," she says. "But you do have to put it into practice afterwards."

And she is quick to credit the support of more experienced activists on her activist journey, including both Wirral and Liverpool City branch secretaries.

"I've had so many mentors in the union that I would ask about everything," Micaela says.

"That's why I always try to encourage young members in my region who ask me for advice on how to get involved, how to get active, or what to do if you're having some problems at work because I understand better how the union works now."

Micaela stepped down as chair of the regional network last year when she was elected young members' rep on the National Executive Council (NEC).

"You can't cling on to anything for too long," she says. "I'd been chair for two years and I wanted to take a step back because I wanted other people to take on responsibility." ✱



Helping make real change

"Working with UNISON for the past two years as a Young Members Officer has opened my eyes to the ongoing struggles wider than I could imagine and has given me the platform to help make real change.

I'm able to listen and work with young members to bring forward ideas that will make a difference to them and future generations.

UNISON is working to make lives better and as a young member it has already changed mine for the better."

Lizzie Johnson, Gloucester Police Branch young member

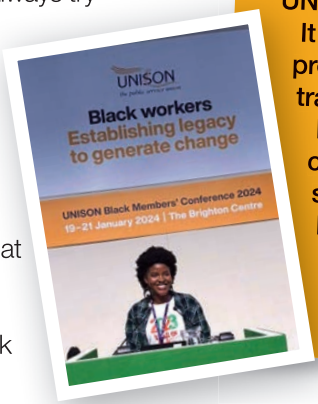
Learning my way round the union

"Shadowing the South West Regional Council meeting in February 2024 contributed greatly to my UNISON learning journey.

It provided insight into the decision-making process undertaken at regional level and how this translates to National Delegate Conference (NDC).

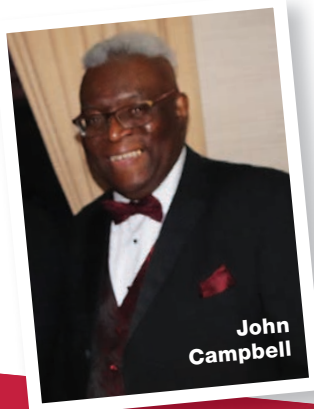
It was lovely to see many of my South West comrades having discussions around UNISON structures, which greatly contributed to my learning about the union."

Roberta Quaye (left), Bournemouth Christchurch & Poole Branch young member



Making a difference

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Branch put together a glittering Black History Month Awards event to mark UNISON's Year of Black Workers.



John Campbell

More than 180 people packed out a night of music, dancing and celebration at the first Yorkshire & Humberside UNISON Black History Month Awards event organised by Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Branch last October.

The event featured performances by a Bollywood dance troupe, a samba band and dancers, gospel singers and a DJ – all there to celebrate six inspirational leaders who won awards on the night for making a difference in their communities.

As well as taking place during last year's Black History Month, the event was also part of UNISON's Year of Black Workers and marked the 75th anniversary of the arrival in London of 1,000 people from the Caribbean on the Empire Windrush.

Regional Learning & Development Organiser Rose Bent collected the Educator award, which marked her work moulding the regional Black Members Group over the past three years.

Calderdale Local Government Branch secured the Trade Union Award for persuading Calderdale Council to become the first employer in the region



Zambia's Deputy High Commissioner Lubu Nxumalo presents Patrick Meleady with his award

to sign up to UNISON's Anti-Racism Charter.

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Branch member Trywell Kalyata won the Community Work award, for leading a project to set up a community university college in Livingstone, Zambia.

Community leader Patrick Meleady took home the Working with Young People Award for bringing together young people of all faiths on a successful project in the Burngreave area of Sheffield.

Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Secretary Karen Loughlin picked up the Company or Organisation Award, celebrating the significant contributions she's made for members, irrespective of age, religion, gender, colour or sexuality.

And Aisha Thabet, a former clinical support worker who's now a matron at the Princess Royal Spinal Injuries Centre was honoured with the Inspirational Black Leader Award, for her role as an advocate for creating inclusive and diverse workplaces.

The distinguished guests who presented the awards included Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough MP Gill Furniss; Deputy Lord Lieutenant of South Yorkshire Peter Bradley; Sheffield Lord Mayor Cllr Colin Ross; and Zambia's Deputy High Commissioner, Lubu Nxumalo.

Branch Secretary John Campbell led the planning of the project, with different teams working on finding a venue (Niagara Conference and Leisure Centre), the awards themselves, performers at the event and the invitation list for local VIPs and community leaders.

John's partner, Elaine Senior, also took on some of the event management tasks, using her experience of organising events with the local Chamber of Commerce earlier in her career in training.

"The idea for the event came from a discussion on the branch committee about how we might celebrate UNISON's Year of Black Workers," John explains.

"But as we did a bit more digging about what we might need to do and who we might need to invite, it just became an awesome project."

Putting the night together took many months of planning. "Because the event was going to be in October, we started sending out flyers in April and May asking for nominations for the awards to give us time to review the nominations and set up a panel to decide the six winners," Elaine says.

The branch was keen to inspire the community leaders of tomorrow. "It was all about lifting aspirations: we were saying, 'These people have done it – you could do it next'," John says.

The branch has now handed over organisation of this year's Black History Month Awards to the Northern Health and Community Branch, which is based in Leeds.

But it's already well on the way to delivering its next major event – a Rainbow Ball in July to mark UNISON's Year of LGBT+ Workers, with another set of awards to celebrate leaders who've made a difference to the LGBT+ community. ✱

Rose's work wins recognition

Regional Learning & Development Organiser (RLDO) Rose Bent won the Educator award in recognition of her commitment to helping Black members in Yorkshire & Humberside develop their skills through both online and in-person courses.

Like all the learning Rose organises for all UNISON members, the courses have been designed to help people both progress in their work roles and to take on more responsibilities in their UNISON branches.

"It's wonderful for what you do to be recognised by everybody," Rose says.



© MARCUS ROSE

Thousands of members are gaining the confidence to support their trans, non-binary and gender-diverse co-workers on UNISON's trans ally training programme.

Promoting trans rights at work

More than 4,000 members have gained the skills and confidence to support trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people since UNISON launched its ground-breaking trans ally training course two years ago.

"It's been phenomenal – it's exceeded all our expectations as a training programme, and it's achieving success that no other programme has had in UNISON," says North Tyneside Branch Secretary Jenny Black, who's delivered many of the sessions herself.

As well as giving learners the confidence and skills to challenge anti-trans rhetoric in the workplace, the course has also encouraged more LGBT+ members to become active in the union, Jenny says.

"They can see that UNISON is doing something for them and that motivates them to get engaged – the number of activists we have onboard now is a direct measure of the organising success of the course," she points out.

The course is also designed to encourage members to

"We'll start to get people understanding the real issues in this country at the moment and how they can play a role in changing things"

share what they've learned with their co-workers, friends and family members.

"We want more people becoming more educated on the issues so they can educate others as well," she says.

"I think the ally programme is really good because it encourages people to speak up and challenge discrimination in whatever way works for them."

Around 120 UNISON members identified as trans, non-binary or gender-diverse when the course was launched two years ago as part of the union's Trans Equality Campaign.

But that number had soared to 525 by February this year, as more trans members have had the confidence to come out as a direct result of being able to see their own union standing up for them, Jenny says.

It's especially important for LGBT+ members to know they have UNISON's support at a time when anti-trans voices are being so extensively platformed on social media and in mainstream media, she says.

"The wholly negative narrative coming out of Westminster and in the media is starting to have a negative effect on people's opinions about LGBT+ people and our community," Jenny says.

Jenny hopes that the Year of LGBT+ Workers will engage more young activists in the union and persuade more employers to adopt, implement and monitor LGBT+ and trans equality policies.

"That way, we'll start to get that positive narrative out there, and we'll start to get people understanding the real issues in this country at the moment and how they can play a role in changing things," she says.

Jenny thinks that UNISON will have to work more intersectionally in the future to build on the achievements of the Year of Disabled Workers in 2022, the Year of Black Workers in 2023 and this year's Year of LGBT+ Workers.

"The support we've received from our Black members over the last two years has been quite phenomenal – we really need to make sure we all stand in allyship with each other across the board," she says. ✱

London gets ready

Forty activists from across Greater London equipped themselves with campaign and bargaining tools for UNISON's Year of LGBT+ Workers on a training day hosted by the regional LGBT+ Committee in February.

"The training and organising day is a chance for all UNISON members, irrespective of their gender identity or sexual orientation, to come along and find out what the LGBT+ network is doing," says regional LGBT+ committee co-chair Terry Eastham.

Activists expanded their knowledge of three key issues in the workshops on:

- **negotiating trans equality policies**
- **encouraging LGBT+ participation in elections**
- **HIV awareness and the law.**

At the end of the day, participants all committed to taking action back in their branches, including setting up a branch LGBT+ self-organised group; negotiating a trans equality policy; and encouraging their employer to sign up to the HIV Confident Charter.

"It was great to see the enthusiasm in the room to make the Year of LGBT+ Workers a success in Greater London," says regional co-chair Anu Prashar.





Helping members who missed out at school

Bedford Hospital ULR Carol Smith is supporting NHS workers who may have been let down by the education system when they were growing up.

Carol Smith became a union learning rep (ULR) six years ago because of her deep belief in the power of learning.

As the Library Services and Knowledge Manager at Bedford Hospital, Carol was already committed to helping colleagues like pharmacy students progress in their careers.

"Learning is part and parcel of being a librarian – we just want accessible education for everybody," she says.

But as a ULR, Carol is able to reach out to many more co-workers, some of whom might never have realised how learning could help them move on at work, as well.

"Being a ULR and the branch education coordinator is not in conflict with my day job – I've always been passionate that everyone can go for learning," she says.

For Carol learning is an equality issue – a chance

for people to overcome inequalities created by missing out at school.

"If staff were previously let down by the education system, learning at work gives them the chance to gain skills and confidence and even promotion," she says.

"I really enjoy seeing people thrive when they realise they can study and learn new things and change their lives."

A case in point is the recent English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course for some of the domestic staff.

"I organised that with Ligia Soares, who is a supervisor in the domestic team who has English as a second language," Carol says.

"It was very well attended: there was a very low dropout rate and the team progressed very well – that's been one of our biggest successes."

"Learning is an equality issue – a chance for people to overcome inequalities created by missing out at school"

Another popular course is Keeping Safe on Social Media Working for the NHS, which Carol co-delivers with Bedfordshire Health Branch Secretary Ian Thomas.

"We've got it down to a fine art – I'm the good cop and he's the bad cop!" Carol says. "So Ian points out that if you put something really silly on social media, you could end up losing your job as a nurse."

In addition to delivering some courses, as a trained lay tutor Carol is also available to signpost members to online learning opportunities.

With many members starting to trace their family history, Carol has also been able to draw on her previous career as a registrar to share useful tips and tricks with people using online resources – including how they can save money by not paying out for certificates they don't actually need.

Carol also brings external tutors into the hospital to share their expertise, such as the local Buddhist teacher who delivers mindfulness sessions with staff once a month.

"The sessions are funded by UNISON but they're open to everyone," Carol explains. "We have people from every department you can imagine, and when they come out of the room at the end of the session they look so relaxed – and that's another time I think 'I've made a difference today in my little way'."

"Learning may be something to help them relax or it may be something that can help them in their career progression: education is the key to life"

The Trust is completely behind the branch's drive to help ever-increasing numbers of staff engage with learning in the hospital. "The Trust is absolutely supportive of union learning," Carol says.

Carol is keen to continue spreading the message about all the learning opportunities available through UNISON College.

"I don't think all of our members know just how much is available," she says. "Learning may be something to help them relax or it may be something that can help them in their career progression: education is the key to life – that's the most amazing thing." ✱



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Tackling the climate crisis together

The Connecting Learners project in Cymru/ Wales has developed an extensive portfolio of climate courses to inspire a collective response to the emergency.

"The course looks at recognising climate anxiety, understanding where it comes from, doing some mindfulness practice and then creating some actions from out of that"

Members in Cymru / Wales are gaining the confidence, knowledge and skills to take part in collective action to meet the climate emergency through learning with their union.

"The range of what we offer is what engages learners," says Area Learning Development Organiser Jenny Griffin.

"Being green at home might be really important to somebody whereas using bikes rather than cars might be really important to somebody else – it's making sure you've got that message that hits home for each individual learner."

Already over the past year, 100 members have enrolled on the half-day Climate and Just Transition Awareness online course, which can be delivered in English by Area Learning Development Organiser Richard Speight or in Welsh by Jonathan Perry, a UNISON green rep from Coleg Gwent.

Based on the UNISON Climate Crisis and Green Skills session, the course has been adapted for the specifics of the Welsh policy context.

On the one hand, the Welsh

government's aim to reach net zero by 2030 makes it the most ambitious part of the UK.

On the other, the massive job cuts unions are fighting at Port Talbot steelworks would have devastating economic, employment and mental health consequences for the country (which public service workers would have to deal with).

Richard and Jenny have also worked with sustainability charity Cynnal Cymru, who have developed their Nature Wise Eco Literacy course into a half-day webinar for UNISON members.

"That course is about the public service worker's role in delivering that obligation on public bodies, under the Environment (Wales) Act, to enhance the natural biodiversity of their communities," Richard says.

The team have also partnered with mindfulness tutor Melanie Sinclair, who's created a short course to help members working with children and young people experiencing climate anxiety.

"The course looks at recognising climate anxiety, understanding where it comes from, doing some mindfulness practice and then creating some actions from out of that," Richard says.

Richard and Jenny have linked up with The Open University (OU) to develop a course called Green Social Prescribing, which shows public service workers how connecting individuals to non-clinical services and activities (social prescribing) can help people overcome eco-anxiety and get more active in their community.

They are also working with the Cardiff charity Green Squirrel, who have run a series of webinars called Good for Your Pocket, Good for the Planet, which explain the green benefits of reducing consumerism through sessions such as Buy Less, Feel Better.

"The courses have been wildly popular and everyone who attends them get three months' free membership of Green Squirrel's training and community hub Climate Village, which has also got many different courses they can do," Richard says.

Richard is currently developing a new course called Working in Extreme Weather, which aims to expand UNISON member input into management climate plans (under 20 per cent of members have been consulted by the employers on the issues, according to the union's 2022 report into what members think about climate change).

"The climate emergency is not an individual issue – it's a workplace issue"

"This course has the purpose of capturing the voice of the workers who attend it and feeding that back up through the branch to the employer, so that the course is a mechanism for worker voice on climate adaptation," Richard explains.

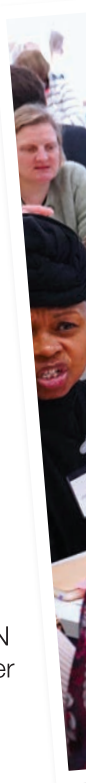
Jenny says that developing this expanding portfolio of learning opportunities is all about learner progression. "We're saying, 'Now that you've attended this course, have you considered the other courses that we've got or becoming a green rep?'," she says.

"It's also about saying to employers that, as you've got these people who are engaged and interested, can we get them a place within employer partnerships, where they're part of that discussion representing the union – that's also very much front and centre."

Richard agrees. "The fossil fuel industry says it's your fault because you're the one driving the car, or taking the plane," he says. "Our unique contribution is to run these courses so that people understand the climate emergency is not an individual issue – it's a workplace issue and it's a collective issue." ✱

Developing members, growing the union

Our ULR Conference heard how member learning boosts participation in UNISON and helps deliver our organising priorities.



"I really value the development and growth of our workforce, and to be able to direct and support members with the learning that UNISON provides."
Sue Jugon, East Midlands ULR

Union learning reps (ULRs) returned to their branches after the most recent ULR Conference newly convinced of their vital role as UNISON activists.

Learning & Workforce Development Officer John Finnegan started the day by asking: How many of you see yourselves as activists?

"Not many of them actually put up their hands at the start of the day," recalls John, who led the team that put together last November's conference. "But when I asked the same question at the end, the whole room threw their hands up."

This instant feedback showed the conference had achieved its goal of offering ULRs the support they needed to promote learning at work and build a stronger union.

John says that the focus of the conference was very much on finding out what ULRs most needed from Learning and Organising Services (LAOS).

"We wanted a day of engagement with ULRs to make sure we were hearing their voices about their actual needs within their branches, regions and workplaces," he says.

For example, learning reps were able to spend one session studying the UNISON College member learning offer so they could break it down into the four headings that would help them promote the courses to members and potential members, which they decided were:

- **personal:** public speaking / building confidence; dealing with difficult conversations; financial wellbeing; pensions and preparing for retirement; trade union history; creative writing.
- **professional:** neurodiversity; challenging racism; interview skills; dealing with suicide and bereavement; domestic abuse awareness.
- **wellbeing:** assertiveness; time management; mindfulness; mental health first aid; menopause awareness.
- **Functional Skills:** English; maths; digital.

They also had time to



identify the courses they thought would most help them further develop in their role as ULRs, which included: digital skills; equality courses; neurodiversity awareness; menopause awareness; train the trainer sessions; negotiation skills; UNISON / union history.

And everyone was able to experience the benefits of an in-person Learning Café, based on the online sessions that have been bringing together ULRs since the first Covid lockdown, to inspire them to set up their own.

Members are 80 per cent more likely to get active in the union when they take part in more than two learning events.

So the conference finished with every ULR committing themselves to actively raising awareness of member learning back in their branches.

The pledges included:

- carry out a learning needs assessment
- set up a local learning café
- set up a local bulletin or newsletter.

"Everyone made a pledge that they were going to go away and do a piece of work around learning and development," John says. "It was really good to collect them all and see what kinds of things people were coming up with – it worked really well."

John feels very happy that the conference helped change people's ideas about what being a ULR involves.

"This was possibly the most engaging, interactive and successful ULR conference I've been involved in – not because I put it together, but from feeling the energy in the room and reading the feedback afterwards," John says.

"It was great to see how, as the day went on, union learning reps felt more confident about going away and flying the flag and banging the drum for learning by the end." ✱

"Going to this conference has inspired me: I feel re-energised and enthused to engage members. I'm going to go back to my workplace and remind members I am the learning rep!"
Amanda Trafford, North West ULR



Sign up for ULR training

You can gain the knowledge and skills you need as a union learning rep on a regional or national ULR course.



You can gain the skills you need to become a union learning rep (ULR) on either a regional or a national course.

Taking part in a course in your region means you'll meet other ULRs from your locality and you'll all learn about the specific support and resources that are available in your region.

Contact your branch to find out if and when there's a ULR course you can enrol on in your region.

But if there's no regional course in the offing, you can apply for a place on one of the upcoming national courses by searching the 'Upcoming training and events' page on the UNISON Learning website: **https://learning.unison.org.uk/events/**

And if you can't make any of the upcoming courses, you can join the waiting list to be notified when more courses are organised by filling in a short form on the website at **https://learning.unison.org.uk/events/ulr-stage-1-waiting-list/**.

National ULR training is delivered in four half-day sessions:

- week 1 is an introduction to the role, including ULRs' statutory rights
- week 2 looks at working with your branch and in the workplace
- week 3 concentrates on supporting members





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"The sessions all include presentations by the tutors with whole-group and small-group discussions that are popular with ULRs"

CHECK ONLINE

Like forthcoming ULR courses, Learning Cafés are advertised in the 'Upcoming training and events' page on the UNISON Learning website: **https://learning.unison.org.uk/events/**

* week 4 sets ULRs a task to take back to their workplace.

The sessions all include presentations by the tutors with whole-group and small-group discussions that are popular with ULRs for allowing people to share experiences and support each other.

Some of the very positive feedback from learning reps who've recently completed the national course includes:

* "It's inspired me to get learning onto the agenda both at my branch and in the workplace."
* "I found it very relevant and quite inspiring and feel very motivated to establish myself as the ULR."
* "It made me realise how important learning is to UNISON and how we can use it to organise."

New ULRs and everyone interested in supporting learning can keep in touch via the online Learning Cafés that happen every six weeks. The Learning Café is an on online forum, where you can drop in to share experiences and discuss different topics with ULRs and other activists. *



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Building people up through learning

Whether she's wearing her ULR or her women's officer hat, Lucy Anesi is always promoting opportunities for learning and support to members of her police branch.

In addition to spreading the word about UNISON's support for women as Bedfordshire Police Branch women's officer, Lucy Anesi is now promoting the full range of learning opportunities as the branch's first Union Learning Rep (ULR).

"Now that I've finished my training and got my 'wings', I'm going to be using every platform I've got to make people aware of the different learning and development opportunities there are," she says.

"I want to help other

"I feel strongly about empowering women to know their rights and how the union can help them"

people feel empowered to get involved in the branch – my dream would be to have a little team of ULRs to be able to spread the word within Bedfordshire!"

After training to become a steward at the beginning of the pandemic, Lucy then attended the Police and Justice Service Group conference, where she was inspired by all the passion and commitment shown by so many other delegates.

That's why she looked into what other branch roles were available – and women's officer leaped out because of her own experiences of fertility problems, miscarriages and early menopause over her 19-year policing career.

"I feel strongly about empowering women to know their rights and how the union can help them because a lot of people don't realise there's so much support that's available," she says.

"I was the same: before I got actively involved, I thought UNISON was only there to support you if things went wrong but I've realised that's only the tip of the iceberg."

As there hadn't been a ULR in the branch before, Lucy hadn't been aware of all the learning opportunities available through the union until recently.

"I was trawling through the UNISON website and came across the ULR role and I thought, 'I love a course – I wonder what this is all about?'," she recalls.

"I thought this is something that would work really well with my women's officer hat on."

While Lucy has done countless in-house training courses and prefers online learning to watching TV, she says she used to struggle back in school.

But a recent diagnosis with Irlen syndrome, a rare form of neurodiversity that compromises the brain's ability to process visual information, has made a big difference.

Not only does Lucy better understand her needs as a result, she's also been able to get coloured overlay glasses that make reading easier and secure reasonable adjustments at work.

"I've got some magic Irlen filter glasses that make me look a bit like Elton John but they've transformed my life!" she laughs. "And I've been fully supported with the adjustments that have been put in place at work."

Lucy loves how ULRs can make a difference far beyond their own workplaces. "We were talking on my training course about how ULRs have an impact not just on individual members but on their families as well," she says.

"I think being a ULR is fantastic – being able to help people feel like, whatever role they're in, they can learn something to make them feel fulfilled"

"There are so many avenues that have a positive impact on members' families at home – learning can help them support their children with their homework or it can help them with managing their finances."

And now that she has got her ULR 'wings', Lucy's all set to encourage more people into learning through the union.

"I think being a ULR is fantastic – being able to help people feel like, whatever role they're in, they can learn something to make them feel fulfilled," she says.

"Times are hard now, with a lot of negative things in the press, the cost of living and everything like that, but as a ULR you can be the rainbow for someone's cloud! What's not to love about building people up and helping them be the best that they can be?" ✱

Getting active to challenge racism



UNISON's partnership with Show Racism the Red Card is equipping activists with the tools to tackle racism in their communities and workplaces.

Improving racial literacy

Members in Northern Ireland are equipping themselves to challenge racism at the workplace and beyond through the online course, Racial Literacy Training for Anti-Racism Advocacy and Challenging Racism in the Workplace.

The course examines the issues facing Black and migrant workers and the action that activists can take to challenge racism in the workplace.

Participants on the course explore the opportunities provided by equality law to identify and deal with institutional racism, and get to grips with the tools they can use to engage with their employer to tackle discrimination.

Show Racism the Red Card (SRtRC) continues to help UNISON activists gain the knowledge and skills to challenge discrimination through its highly regarded Ambassadors courses.

A group of North West reps completed the in-person version of the programme earlier this year, while another group of activists from all over the country took part in the online version.

Participants from both are now part of SRtRC's Ambassador network, which enables members to connect with each other, share good practice and get advice about the most effective ways to address issues that they're facing.

"We really encourage people to become Ambassadors once they've completed the course," explains SRtRC's North West Manager Keziah Major.

"We want to see them

"I was really impressed with their engagement and their enthusiasm – they were asking really interesting questions"



✱ If you would like to become an Ambassador, ask your branch about taking part in a regional or national course.

be active in their anti-racism, both in their union and in their workplaces."

Keziah was struck by the way the North West reps engaged with programme. "I was really impressed with their engagement and their enthusiasm – they were asking really interesting questions," she says.

SRtRC also delivered online Introduction to Racism workshops for the UNISON service group executives last autumn, as part of UNISON's Year of Black Workers.

"There was a big geographic spread on those sessions, which is always powerful," Keziah says. "So, for example, the Welsh Assembly has its own Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, so when you've got Welsh participants, they can talk about what you can do with government support."

SRtRC's partnership with UNISON helps combat divisions that the government and the media often seek to stir up, Keziah says.

"For us, as a charity, the support of a union like UNISON is so important because it's one of the largest bodies of workers in the country," she says.

"So while the government and the media often pit the white working class against people from different ethnic backgrounds, our partnership helps us talk about the intersection of being part of the working class and being from a diverse background, and the huge amount of similarity in both struggles," she says. ✱

Intersectional learning

Taking part in UNISON North West's Challenging Racism in the Workplace course last year proved valuable for Damian Daley, steward and vice-chair of UNISON Inspire, Manchester Branch's self-organised forum for Black members.

The tutors from Stand Up To Racism introduced activists to a number of concepts and themes during the course, including the 'Wheel of Privilege' (a dynamic, intersectional model of how different people are close to, or far from, power), Damian recalls.

"It's a visualisation of a number of different factors that can impact on someone's access to privilege and power," Damian says.

"It not only shows the recognised protected characteristics but also more socio-economic factors, such your income, whether you're looking for work, and whether you speak English as a first language, which helped me look at things with a broader perspective."







Talking about the realities of trans lives

Danny Purdie reflects on their experience of preparing for and delivering UNISON's ground-breaking trans ally training.

National LGBT+ Committee member Danny Purdie has started to deliver UNISON's trans ally training course after taking part in an online 'train the trainer' session last year.

The session led new trainers through the content of the course and how they could contribute their own experiences as trans people.

"We went through the presentation and what's expected of the trainers, and we had a discussion about what we'd like to add about our personal experiences to help people understand our different life experiences as trans people," Danny says.

Danny says they were struck by the hard-hitting honesty of the session, which

"I think it was really important for me to know that the training I was going to be delivering is really honest"



was delivered by Jenny Black and Emma Proctor, the co-chairs of UNISON's Trans, Non-binary and Gender Diverse network at the time.

"A lot of times as a trans person, you're expected to sanitise your experiences and say, 'It's okay if you get my pronouns wrong, it's okay if you get my name wrong'," they say.

"I think it was really important for me to know that the training I was going to be delivering is really honest and explores trans experience in an unfiltered way."

Since then, Danny has enjoyed both occasions they've delivered the training to members so far.

"It's nice to come together as a group and interact with people who've maybe never met a trans person before and show them we're just getting on with our lives, doing the same jobs you're doing – that trans people are everywhere and all around you," they say.

"It's really good to get those people onboard to stick up for us if they come across transphobia in the workplace."

The training is making a real difference throughout the union, says Danny, who is now one of the co-chairs of the Trans, Non-binary and Gender Diverse network.

"The effect is being felt across the union and there's a larger awareness of the issues that trans people are facing and the impact of politicians saying transphobic things," they say.

"When you actually open people's eyes to what is going on, they say, 'I would have said something if I'd known that was happening' – and that's really good, because I want to make a difference."

Danny has been learning since joining UNISON when they started work as a customer feedback officer for Aberdeen City Council a couple of years ago.

"I did the U in UNISON e-note straightaway when I joined," they say. "I think it's a really good course, which explains how you fit into UNISON as a member."

Danny says it's courses like this that help young members find their way round the union – which is especially important if they don't come from a trade union background.

"My mum's a Royal College of Nursing (RCN) rep, my grandma's an RCN rep, so the moment I started at Tesco when I was 16 years old, I joined Unite the union – but I know a lot of young members don't have that," they say.

More recently, Danny has taken both the gender identity discrimination and sexuality discrimination advanced employment law half-day courses for stewards. "I think they really open your eyes to the range of issues you could come across in your workplace and it sounds weird but I really enjoyed them!" they say.

The half-day courses have also helped Danny with their coursework on the postgraduate certificate (PgCert) in Psychology in the Workplace at the University of Aberdeen that they're studying in their own time.

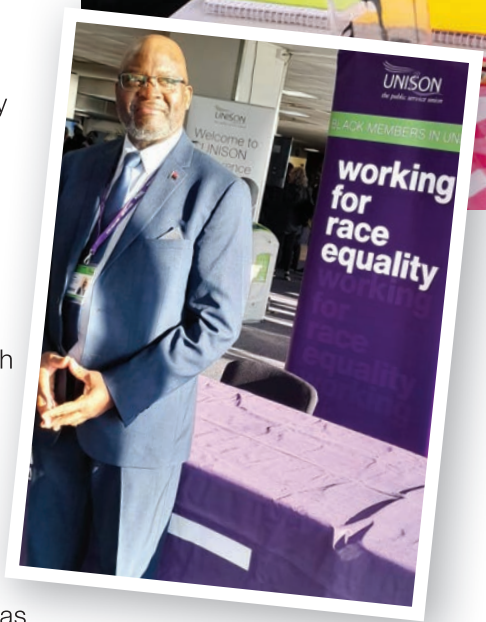
"My focus is on social bias in the workplace, looking at discrimination against trans people in the workplace, so doing sexuality discrimination and gender identity discrimination really fed into that," they say. *

"It's nice to come together as a group and interact with people who've maybe never met a trans person before and show them we're just getting on with our lives, doing the same jobs you're doing"

Yes, we can!

Return to Learn courses boost members' confidence that they can progress their careers and move on in their lives.





Tonico Jose

Members in Yorkshire and Humberside got so much out of their Return to Learn course that didn't want it to end when the 16 weeks were up in February.

"I felt so disappointed when Return to Learn actually ended – we all felt it should be a forever thing!" says Sheffield Community Health Branch member Glory Kerr.

The course turned out to be exactly what Glory was looking for when she signed up last year, she says.

"I've been looking forward to going back to learning and Return to Learn gave me a fresh start to make me feel 'Yes I can' even though I've been out of education for a while," says Glory, who is a support worker at the Sheffield Health and Social Care (SHSC) NHS Trust.

"It really boosted my morale and brought me back to where I wanted to be – Return to Learn really gave me that hope."

Glory is full of praise for Workers' Educational Association (WEA) tutor Nicky Reed, who delivered the course.

"I really enjoyed the way she handled the class – she was a great listener, she was very open, and she made learning very interesting," she says.

Tonico Jose, another member of Sheffield Community Health Branch who also completed the course, agrees that Nicky was welcoming and inclusive.

"She was fantastic: she did everything possible to engage with the class, and she was always open to everything we needed," he says.

Learning in a supportive group was part of the appeal of the course to both learners.

"Interacting with my other classmates who had the same enthusiasm for learning motivated me," Glory says. "I've always loved interactive classes so learning with other people was really helpful."

Tonico felt surrounded by support even though all the other learners on the course



"I've been looking forward to going back to learning and Return to Learn gave me a fresh start to make me feel 'Yes I can'"

were women. "I was proud of myself because I was the only man in the class!" he says. "All my colleagues were always supportive – they always said, 'Yes Tonico, you can do it!'"

He was particularly keen to improve his English language skills on the course, he says. "I come from Angola, my first language is Portuguese, and I've always had difficulty engaging with the English language since I came here in 2004," he says.

"Return to Learn was a marvellous opportunity for me: I feel more confident speaking in English now, and I would like to carry on in the future to improve my writing in English."

Glory says she feels much more at home on the computer since taking part in the course. "Before, I was a little bit sceptical about using the computer but now the confidence has come from the course there's no fear anymore," she says.

"Return to Learn was a marvellous opportunity for me: I feel more confident speaking in English now"

She also enjoyed writing an essay about her childhood in Lagos, Nigeria, as part of the course. "When I submitted my work, and I was waiting for what the tutor has to say about what I'd written – it makes you feel like you've achieved something big," she says.

Tonico, who is a support worker in a dementia nursing home, is full of praise for all aspects of Return to Learn. "Overall, the course was very good, I would give it ten out of ten!" he says.

Glory has already put what she learned on the course into practice by applying for a Trainee Nursing Associate (TNA) apprenticeship. "Return to Learn gave me the confidence to apply and submit my application by myself," she says.

"I had a really positive experience: it's really changed the way I feel. It was so nice to be able to return to learn." ✱



Developing the whole person

Frances Crum believes in helping members and potential members gain much more than the skills they may need in their day-to-day job roles.

Frances Crum has been helping Norfolk County Branch members and potential members develop themselves through learning in the 10 years that she's been both branch education coordinator (BEC) and branch education officer (BEO).

"I'm an educator at my core, so I believe in developing the whole person, not just those skills that are specific to their current role," she says.

Frances works hard to update branch members about all the learning opportunities that are available to them through UNISON and other providers.

"I send out an email newsletter about training for stewards, learning for members and other opportunities as well,"

Frances says.

"When we ran into IT issues last year, I started writing copy for the branch website, and broke down the education material into stewards' training and member learning."

She also includes links to regional and national UNISON learning and training in her email signature, alongside clickthroughs to the branch website, the retired members' group, There for You (UNISON Welfare) and the mental health charity Hub of Hope.

After television news and national newspapers increased their coverage of extreme weather events last summer, Frances put together a special update about learning resources on the climate emergency and its environmental, social, economic and health impacts.

"I'm an educator at my core, so I believe in developing the whole person, not just those skills that are specific to their current role"

It included links to UNISON's Green Campaign, the TUC's climate emergency online library, the Local Government Association's sustainability hub, the United Nations climate change website (including the UN's short online courses), and resources from Oxfam and digital education platform FutureLearn.

Frances is currently compiling an oral communications course, using the knowledge and experience she gained while working as a qualified drama and English teacher and a speech and acting skills coach in Australia, where she was born and brought up.

"It's a general course, mostly centred on why we speak the way we speak; why we hear the way we hear; and what gets in the way of us communicating properly," she explains.

"It'll be five small units of 20 minutes each that can be delivered as a webinar or a series of pre-recorded webinars."

In addition to her learning and training roles, Frances also promotes learning opportunities when supporting members experiencing financial challenges in her role as branch welfare officer.

"I'm trying to make a definite and worthwhile change within the branch's culture of learning!"

"I steer them in all the right directions – hopefully – for UNISON help and external help and then I give them information about UNISON College courses on finance as well," she says.

"This is so I can blend the two roles of welfare officer and ULR and address a member as a whole person, which is very important to me."

What Frances most enjoys about the ULR role is helping people develop themselves. "I really like the idea that I'm helping people to grow, and I am grateful to be able to help," she says.

She's also keen to make a lasting contribution to branch culture. "I'm trying to make a definite and worthwhile change within the branch's culture of learning so that, after I leave the role, people will continue to learn and continue to be inspired, and maybe they'll help to inspire others too". ✱

Breaking down barriers with BSL training

Sign language courses at a Welsh care provider are changing the lives of d/Deaf service users and the staff who support them.



UNISON members at Welsh social care provider Innovate Trust are transforming the lives of d/Deaf service users after gaining British Sign Language (BSL) skills through the union.

The impact was almost instantaneous when the first cohort of learners completed their BSL 101 course last year, says Cymru / Wales Area Learning Development Organiser Jenny Griffin.

"One of the staff members said you could really see the smile on the service users' faces that somebody was communicating with them in the language they could understand," Jenny says.

"They said, 'It's made the world of difference to our service users – they are able to interact with us instead of having to go and sit in front of the telly because they have nothing else to do'."

The charity employs around 1,000 people to run its care centres across three local authority areas in Wales – Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Vale of Glamorgan.

The majority of staff weren't trained in BSL – which is why the course emerged as a high priority when Jenny met Innovate Trust's Staff Development Manager Donna Miller early last year.

"Because so many staff were interested, we asked the employer if they would pay for one cohort of learners if we paid for the other and they said, 'Yes – absolutely brilliant'," Jenny says.

Sarah Williams-Crouch

"The agreement shows our members that the employer wants to work with the union to prioritise learning and demonstrates that the courses weren't a one-off"



"Our next aim is to find a ULR in each of the three local authority areas where Innovate operate"

from Adult Learning Wales delivered the accredited BSL 101 course to the first two cohorts in weekly two-hour sessions over 10 weeks between February and April last year.

"We had such good feedback from the first two cohorts," says Jenny. "All the learners were saying, 'We want more, we want to continue' and when everybody started hearing about it, they were asking, 'How do we get on?'"

With demand so high, UNISON agreed to fund a third BSL 101 course while Innovate Trust funded the follow-up BSL 102 course for 12 of the original learners.

The courses are having an organising payoff as well, with several learners now keen to become active as workplace contacts or union learning reps (ULRs) and to join the Cymru / Wales women's self-organised group.

Donna and Jenny have also worked together to offer UNISON courses on Time Management and Difficult Conversations to members at the social care provider, which the employer and the union both promoted.

In addition, both sides signed a learning agreement at the beginning of this year. "The agreement shows our members that the employer wants to work with the union to prioritise learning and demonstrates that the courses weren't a one-off – learning is going to be happening all the time now," Jenny says.

Innovate have further proved their commitment to learning with both Donna and her colleague, Health and Safety Development Officer Kieran Vass, signing up to become ULRs.

"The fact that Donna and Kieran both work on the staff training side really helps because they can bring that to the conversation," Jenny says. "Our next aim is to find a ULR in each of the three local authority areas where Innovate operate." ✱

Opening up the world of digital learning

Parks worker and Digital Champion Marcus Sharp is helping colleagues at Nottingham City Council gain the IT skills they need.

Needing to improve their digital skills is why many parks staff begin learning, says Nottingham City Branch Union Learning Rep (ULR) and Digital Champion Marcus Sharp.

"I've noticed it's the digital side of learning that gets them interested," says Marcus, who's been working as a gardener for the past 20 years.

As well as smartphones making digital know-how essential in their personal lives,



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the digital era is also changing their work lives, he points out.

"When I started, toolbox talks were all in-person but they've been gradually switching to online learning over the past three years," he says.

It was the help he was able to offer an older member a few years ago that started spreading the message among his co-workers, he recalls.

"We've got a little side room off the mess room and I took him in there on his breaks and showed him how to set up his emails and how to do his online banking," Marcus says.

"Then he came to me as he'd had an accident at work and I showed him how to make a claim on the UNISON website and he won a significant amount of money."

Helping a group of his co-workers with the online theory part of their PA1 and PA2 certificates in the safe use of pesticides also served to raise Marcus's profile as a Digital Champion.

"I got my certificate a few years ago, so I sat a group of them down in the mess room and got them through the online learning," he says.

"Because my lot were the only group to pass then, now the managers always tell people, 'If you're having difficulty with the online learning, go see Marcus'."

The biggest help he can give his co-workers is to boost their confidence that they can get to grips with digital skills, Marcus says.

"The biggest obstacle is getting them to understand it's easy to pick up once you know what you're doing," he says.

Helping people over that hurdle is what being a Digital Champion is all about for Marcus.

"What I get out of it is the feeling that you've helped someone, you've made life easier for them," he says. ✱

"Now the managers always tell people, 'If you're having difficulty with the online learning, go see Marcus"

Building stewards' negotiating skills

Stewards from both the water, environment and transport and the energy sectors came together in March to boost their negotiating skills on a three-day UNISON College course.

Designed for both experienced and new stewards, the course is built around a role play where three different unions are seeking a recognition agreement with an employer – a set-up that reflects the reality on the ground in both sectors.

The stewards begin by working in three separate teams, each representing one of the fictitious unions, to decide their union's goals for the agreement, before they come together to thrash out a common negotiating position.

They're then divided again into three negotiating teams whose task is to agree different parts of the recognition agreement with managers, who are played by regional organisers from the sectors.

"The idea is to help build up the skills base around negotiating with the employer about any topic, not just recognition," explains Education Officer Jim Lewis.

"It's about the research, doing the groundwork to get members onboard and giving those members ownership of the negotiation or campaign."



Making the case for learning

The best thing about being a ULR is making a difference to members' lives, says Violeta Halasag

Leicestershire Healthcare Branch Union Learning Rep (ULR) Violeta Halasag is always on the lookout for the chance to share her love of learning with colleagues at Leicester Royal Infirmary, where she works as an elderly care liaison service administrator.

"I enjoy showing people all sorts of tips and tricks," she says. "There's a lot of operational knowledge I can share – and I see a lot of co-workers around me who could use some help to become more efficient, even if they don't realise it yet!"

Violeta decided to train

"There's a lot of knowledge I can share – and I see a lot of people around me who need help, even if they don't realise it yet!"



"UNISON College offers so many courses that can be done in your own time, and it's so much easier when you don't need to ask for approval or book a day off"

as a ULR last summer after running some learning stalls with Regional Learning & Development Organiser (RLDO) Gavin McCann.

That was when she realised that becoming a ULR would suit her better than being a steward.

"I loved doing those stalls and Gavin is so inspiring, so I decided to move on to the learning side and took the training in September with him here in Leicester," Violeta says.

Half a dozen ULRs from across the county took the in-person course (one day a week for three weeks) last autumn.

"I finished the course feeling happy that we're doing a good thing by trying to show people more things that could help them in their day-to-day jobs," Violeta says.

The University Hospitals of Leicester Trust offers its own range of mandatory and optional training but securing time off to attend can be difficult for staff.

"But UNISON College offers so many courses that can be done in your own time, and it's so much easier when you don't need to ask for approval or book a day off," Violeta says.

Violeta looks out for any opportunity to spread the message about the power of learning to her co-workers.

"At the moment, I'm advising people around me, talking to my colleagues about the learning opportunities we can do through the union," she says.

"If a colleague is having problems with using Outlook, for example, I try to find a way of explaining that makes them a bit curious about learning – because if you don't learn and keep an open mind, you won't have a chance in the employment market today."

Violeta enjoys the feeling that she's helping people. "I like making a difference to people that are open to learn something new and being able to give them the tools they need or guide them to the information they need to make it easier for them," she says.

It's a role that suits her so well because of her own love of learning, she says. "I'm like a child: I'm curious, I like discovering and knowing stuff – I believe learning is part of our lives until we die: and even when we get ready to pass over, even that's a learning moment!" ✱



Caroline Collinson helping in a Learning Zone

Raising the profile of digital skills

Frontline council workers in Newcastle are gaining and improving their digital skills at the four Learning Zones dotted around the city.

More and more frontline workers at Newcastle City Council are re-discovering they can improve their digital skills at the Learning Zones run by Newcastle City Branch and the local authority.

The Learning Zones are four dedicated IT-equipped spaces in different council sites around the city, where workers can develop their digital skills with the help of lead Union Learning Rep (ULR) Caroline Collinson.

This means they can access information and online forms, find their digital payslips and check their pension statements and other services now that the council has moved all of them to paperless mode.

"We're still getting back to normal after Covid, building up the Learning Zones and encouraging members to come in again," Caroline says.

"It's really rewarding to see people increasing their confidence and self-esteem"

"But in the last three months of last year, there were more than 175 visits to the Zones and I would expect the numbers will be higher this year."

Caroline had been active as a ULR and a steward for eight years before taking on the role of lead ULR for the project last autumn.

"Since I started, I've tried to be visible, sending the message that the Learning Zones are open and everyone can pop in to have a look at what's going on," she says.

"It was slow at first because of that fear of the unknown with IT, but word of mouth is spreading and I'm becoming a familiar face so people feel comfortable about asking for help."

Caroline spends two hours a week at set times in each of the Zones, but she's more than happy to set up sessions with individuals at other times to suit their work patterns.

While the project focuses on helping frontline staff improve

their digital skills, it also promotes wider learning, health and wellbeing issues, too.

So Caroline has set up a bookswap bookshelf outside one of the Zones, designed to encourage workers to take part in the Reading Ahead challenge, where they pledge to read and review six pieces of writing.

In addition, schools staff, who often find it difficult to secure release for learning, are coming into another one of the Zones regularly to develop their skills there.

Caroline has loved seeing how frontline staff have grown and developed through the Learning Zones in the six months since she took on the role (which is co-funded by the branch and the city council).

"It's really rewarding to see people increasing their confidence and self-esteem – you can help someone with the smallest thing they don't know how to do and you know the next time they will know and it will become a habit that never goes away," she says.

"And it does produce activism as well: I invited a member who'd been using the Learning Zone to come to our branch annual general meeting, and we had a conversation after that and now they're thinking about becoming a Union Learning Rep." ✱

SkillsZone opens in North Tyneside

The UNISON, Unite and GMB branches at North Tyneside Council have opened a new onsite learning space in partnership with the local authority to encourage council staff who don't use computers in their day-to-day jobs to gain digital skills.

SkillsZone is a dedicated space at the Killingworth depot, where the council's environment, construction and housing workers who are based there can drop in on Wednesday afternoons to access support from the union learning reps (ULRs) and one of the council's digital skills trainers.

The formal launch event in February featured speeches from the chief executive and a Cabinet member both welcoming the initiative, which is also supported by the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA).

Since SkillsZone is already attracting widespread interest among council workers, the branch is hoping to open spaces at other council sites to enable more workers to boost their career prospects and improve their everyday lives by gaining digital skills.

"SkillsZone has got momentum now because we're getting people in who have heard about it from their colleagues and the Organisational Development Team has got the message out to managers that they've got to promote this benefit," says Roger Layton, the Joint Trade Union Committee Secretary who is also one of seven ULRs at the local authority supporting the initiative.



"What we'd like to see is three or four SkillsZones in the borough that are open to all, and if we got that, we'd be quite happy."

Inspiring members to get involved



Michelle Delury has won the Midlands TUC ULR Award for inspiring members throughout Lincolnshire and raising the profile of her branch in the workplace.



When University of Lincoln Branch Union Learning Rep (ULR) Michelle Delury found out she'd won the Midlands TUC ULR Award last year, she was – unusually – lost for words.

"I was uncharacteristically stunned into silence when Gavin McCann (Regional Learning & Development Organiser) told me I'd won!" she laughs.

"I felt immensely proud and a bit embarrassed, like, 'That's lovely, but let's move on now!'"

Learning has always been important to Michelle. "Work-based learning can feel like enforced learning – sometimes when someone says, 'We're going to learn all about Excel spreadsheets today', you can see the light go out in people's eyes!" she says.

"But learning is so much more than that to me – it's about personal development as well as professional development."

For Michelle, learning usually works best when people enjoy themselves developing new skills.

"With your job and your family and paying the bills, it can feel exhausting to take on something else, but by making learning a bit more fun, a bit more accessible, it becomes something you happily take on in your free time," Michelle says.

"And that just opens the doors – once people have got a taste for the fun side of learning, they want more."

Michelle's approach is clear from the topics that members across Lincolnshire get to explore in the workshops set up through UNISON's Learning Lincs forum, such as pottery painting, Christmas wreath-making, floristry, urban rewilding and yoga at sessions they can join in-person and online.

But the same goes even for subjects that famously inspire feelings of dread in many people, like public speaking.

"It sounds like it would be quite work-based but that workshop was more

MAIN PHOTO: © JESS HURD



about building up people's confidence around speaking in public, whether that's standing up in front of a new team or delivering a speech at a wedding," Michelle says.

"We had a lovely group of people who came along and they enjoyed it so much they're asking for part two now, which is amazing."

While Michelle's someone who always takes the opportunity to talk to people about learning, she also knows she can rely on satisfied members helping to spread the word as well.

"One lady at the Christmas wreath workshop mentioned they'd been at the public speaking one," Michelle recalls.

"When someone else asked what that was, I opened my mouth to explain but she was already saying, 'It was fantastic' and telling them what we did, and I could let her get on with it! She was so enthusiastic and I think it means more when it comes from somebody who's genuinely got something out of it."

"Michelle has had a massive impact on the branch's visibility and has helped us recruit new members through her work"

Another member on the same course, who was going to a job interview later the same day, said that taking part gave them the confidence to ask for feedback for the first time when they weren't offered the role on that occasion.

"They said they weren't scared of what the panel would tell them because they knew they'd given their all after learning so much at the workshop," Michelle says.

Taking part in learning also helps people overcome feelings of social anxiety, Michelle points out. "It's very humbling to read a feedback form about a workshop you put on that was fun but it's also – for some people – been so much more than that because it's given them the feeling of being productive in their day, so it's added value that is just immeasurable in some cases," she says.

Michelle's branch is very happy that she's secured the recognition of the Midlands TUC award for her work promoting learning.

"Michelle is somebody who inspires everyone – no matter what she is working on, she enthuses others and gets people involved," says University of Lincoln Branch Secretary Sue Partridge.

"Michelle has had a massive impact on the branch's visibility and has helped us recruit new members through her work. She's now started attending the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with me and has a brilliant approach: she's not afraid to speak truth to power but in a positive and constructive way." ✱



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We hold UNISON College events in workplaces, branches, regions, the national office and online. And we aim to attend all of UNISON's conferences. There's usually a member of staff or an activist on hand to answer questions, provide materials, and showcase what we offer. **So please come and say hello!**



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