

# **UNION LEARNING REPRESENTATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THE PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES UNION**

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## **Abstract**

Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are a relatively recent phenomenon and are a new category of lay representation within the workplace in the United Kingdom. They are part of the present New Labour Administration's drive to expand and improve lifelong learning and create the new "*learning society*". In this case, particularly amongst the working population by working in partnership with the trade union movement. This initiative has been given greater credence by the *Employment Act 2002*, which grants a number of statutory rights to ULRs.

The aim of our work is two-fold. Firstly, to examine developments in the establishment of ULRs in the workplace and what has been achieved to date. Secondly, to see how ULRs operate within the workplace and identify the benefits to the employees they help. This will be achieved by undertaking a case study of ULRs of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS)

## **Introduction**

This article draws attention to the fact that in-service education is often dealt with parochially, being seen as of interest only to schools and colleges. We argue that the case presented reminds us that there are powerful links between continuous professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning. In brief what we have here is in-service education and professional development under a different name.

The data needs to be seen in the context of the British trade union movement's historic and continuing commitment to education. In the case of central government policy the energy, commitment, honesty and hopefulness of the ULR stands in stark contrast to the debacle of individual learning accounts. The United Kingdom is unique in the developed world in that it has established by law the right for workers to elect a Union Learning Representatives (ULR). Unusually in this case the UK has given a

right to employees not given in the rest of the European Community, where in many other respects workers have rights denied those in the United Kingdom (Vincenzi and Fairhurst, 2002).

The formulation of the concept of ULRs can be traced to three significant initiatives launched by the present New Labour administration. The first was the creation of the *Union Learning Fund* (ULF) for trade unions announced in *The Learning Age Green Paper* (DfEE, 1998). As The National Literacy Trust (2003) and the Labour Research Department (LRD) (2001) both note, the ULF was established as part of the Department for Education and Employment's (DfEE) strategy to encourage a culture of lifelong learning through developing workplace initiatives and boost the unions' capacity as learning organisations.

According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2002:5), one the aims of the fund are to:

*“...increase learning opportunities for the whole workforce, and especially for excluded groups of employees such as part-time workers, shift workers, freelance workers and those with basic skills needs”.*

The DfES (2002: 4) also notes that the ULF has helped pave the way for the introduction and development of ULRs and that it has helped to establish a nationwide network of over 4,000 trained learning representatives, which could rise to over 22,000 by 2010.

Up to and including the 2003-4 financial year, the fund has been allocated almost £40 million (The National Literacy Trust, 2003) and until April 2003, the fund was administered by the DfES (and its predecessor) after which responsibility was transferred to the Learning and Skills Council.

The second initiative was the *Learning to Succeed* White Paper (DfEE, 1999) which had the principle aim of opening up the debate in terms of creating a new framework for post-16 learning. It recognised that trade unions had a role to play and it shows some joined up thinking by the Government with regard to the ULF and ULRs. It argued that:

*“...The Union Learning Fund is playing a key part in developing a network of Learner Representatives which, together with a diverse range of initiatives designed to boost the quality, quantity and scope of learning in the workplace, is making a reality of lifelong learning for many more people. This excellent work serves to underpin one key emerging message; the role of the trade union is important. But that role is changing. Their activity is increasingly focused on ensuring the long term employability of their members through innovative strategies for developing skills in the workplace”.*

Further credence and authority was given to both the unions and ULRs in the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) and DfEE White Paper entitled *Opportunity for All in a World of Change* (2001). This dealt with the issues of enterprise, skills and innovation, which it regarded as the vital next steps to securing viable and sustainable economic growth and success for the first decade of the new millennium (DTI and DfEE, 2001: Para 1.1). It argued that:

*“Unions and workforce representatives have a crucial role to play in common cause with employers to ensure that individuals have the portable skills they need whilst meeting the immediate needs of business. We are committed as a Government to ensuring that Union Learning Representatives can play their part in both the competitiveness of the enterprise and the personal investment and gains for the employee for lifelong learning”* (DTI and DfEE, 2001: Para. 2.42).

To this end it proposed to give statutory backing to ULRs (DTI and DfEE, 2001: Para 2.42). This was music to the ears of trade unionists as John Monks (General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress [TUC]) has pointed out, education and learning have been core elements of trade union and TUC business and ever since the TUC’s inception, “...there has been a continuing belief that improving skills will improve opportunities for union members”. He argues that this has been a “*Quiet Revolution*” since 1998 with the introduction, development and growth of ULRs (TUC, 2001).

### **The Union Learning Representative**

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to understand who ULRs are and what their role is. They are lay representatives of unions who receive no financial remuneration apart from expenses accrued in pursuance of their activities. According to the TUC (2001), anyone can become a learning representative, either by volunteering for the role or being elected by fellow union members. The representatives do not need to have an academic background and many have become ULRs because of taking advantage of a learning opportunity.

The Amicus trade union defines a learning representative as:

*“...a new type of union activist, trained to support the learning of colleagues at work.*

*The role can include:*

- *Raising awareness and promoting the value of learning*
- *Providing information on learning*
- *Identifying learning needs*
- *Working with employers and other partners to improve access to learning opportunities*
- *Monitoring quality of provision, and supporting equal opportunities in learning*

*For members, the learning representative is someone they can go to for information about learning and training, someone whose advice they can trust. Learning representatives can also assist the union in representing members learning needs, and support negotiations with employers about learning issue” (Amicus, 2003).*

The TUC (2002) points out that ULRs are trained either by their own union or the TUC in order to ensure that they can support the learning of their work colleagues. It argues that their *“...role is innovative and continuing to develop”*.

As the TUC (2002) highlights, the ULRs do receive wide-ranging support for their activities. They are given initial training for their role through courses provided by the TUC, which are accredited by the Open College Network. Over a third of representatives have received additional training in areas such as supporting colleagues with basic skills needs and the ULRs are receiving increasing levels of support in the form of updates and further training from either the TUC’s own Learning Services division or individual union learning representative co-ordinators.

To further aid the development of ULRs, the TUC in conjunction with Prime R& D (2000) has produced a set of Learning Representative Standards. There are six key standards, each with a sub-set of standards. The key standards deal with promoting learning; developing a learning agenda and strategy for the promotion of learning; supporting members in planning and managing their learning; enabling learners to

access learning opportunities and resources; enhancing the role of union learning representatives and assessing peoples' progression towards, and achievement of, National Vocational Qualifications.

These standards clearly show the importance the TUC attaches to the role of ULRs and this is further complemented by its recent "*call to action*" (TUC, 2002). It argued that these representatives are at a crucial early stage of their development and it called for greater recognition and stronger support structures for them. For example, it proposed that trade unions should "*...develop training and support networks to ensure that learning representatives are equipped to carry out their role*"; that learning representatives should "*...work with employers to ensure that they add value to the activities of training and human resource professionals*"; employers should "*...recognise the added value that learning representatives offer and work with them to ensure that all employees have access to appropriate qualifications and wider developmental learning*" and the Government should "*...promote best practice among those employers that work with learning representatives*" (TUC, 2002).

The rail unions have taken this call on board and in 2002, ASLEF, RMT and the TSSA signed a joint agreement on learning representatives arguing that "*...In this way the Railway Trade Unions will build on the successes gained to-date and maximise the learning potential within our respective organisations to achieve a culture of lifelong learning within the rail industry*" (ASLEF, RMT and TSSA, 2002).

Following a survey of ULRs, the Labour Research Department (LRD) has developed a learning agenda for representatives based on the TUC premise that negotiating a

learning agreement with an employer is as important as negotiating a pay and conditions one. It argues that the agenda should include some or all of the following:

- *a commitment from both parties to lifelong learning;*
- *the number of learning reps and how the union will appoint them;*
- *the amount of paid time off for learning reps to carry out their duties, and undertake training;*
- *type and form of training;*
- *the amount of time off permitted for access time for union members to engage their ULRs and when it could be paid time off;*
- *the procedure for requesting time off;*
- *the procedure for resolving disputes over time off;*
- *payment for time off and whether payment might be made to shift and part-time employees undertaking trade union duties outside their normal working hours;*
- *facilities for learning reps such as a room to conduct interviews, use of a telephone, electronic mail, Internet, notice boards etc;*
- *the establishment of a joint learning committee comprising of equal numbers of union and employer representatives;*
- *the undertaking of learning needs surveys;*
- *regular promotional activities regarding learning;*
- *regular dissemination of information on training and learning opportunities;*  
*and*
- *access to training provision (LRD, 2003: 6-8).*

### **Statutory Recognition for ULRs**

It seems that the Government has heeded the TUC call for greater recognition of learning representatives through the *Employment Act 2002*. This piece of legislation puts ULRs on a statutory footing (as of April 2003) and not only does it give recognised trade unions the right to appoint ULRs it also allows them to have paid leave to train and perform their duties (Section 43 (1)). Section 43 (2) of the Act sets out the activities of the representatives as: analysing learning or training needs, providing information and advice on learning and training matters, arranging learning or training and promoting their value. The legislation also requires ULRs to be trained and to be entitled to reasonable time off to undertake their duties. The amount of time itself must relate directly to the representatives activities (Section 43 (3-6)).

The statutory recognition is given further credence and teeth by the fact that it is accompanied by a code of practice on time off for trade union activities, which specifically includes guidance on time off for learning representatives (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service [ACAS], 2003). It reinforces the provisions of the Act, clarifies issues and gives specific direction to ULRs.

A good example of this is that the code highlights the fact that many employers already have in place well established employee training and development programmes and directs learning representatives to liaise with employers to ensure that their respective training activities complement rather than duplicate each other (ACAS, 2003:10).

With regard to the training that a ULR must receive, the code contends that it is regarded as good practice for the training to be delivered within six months of an employee being appointed to the role, although this can be extended. It also points out that to satisfy this statutory training requirement a learning representative must be able to demonstrate to their respective trade union that they are able to operate competently in one or more of the areas of activity relevant to their duties as highlighted in Section 43 (3) of the Act. The key areas highlighted by the code are: analysing learning or training needs; providing information and advice about learning or training matters; arranging and supporting learning and training and promoting the value of learning and training (ACAS, 2003:14-15).

The code points out that a ULR can demonstrate to their union that they have received sufficient training to operate competently in one or more of the aforementioned activities if they have completed a training course approved by the TUC or their union or by showing that they have previously gained relevant expertise and experience to operate effectively as a learning representative. The code also states that although not required by the legislation, there are clear advantages to the ULR, their union and organisation if the training the representative receives leads to a recognised qualification standard (ACAS, 2003: 15-16).

Further guidance states that ULRs are entitled to “*reasonable*” time off to undertake their duties as specified (and highlighted above) in the legislation but the amount of time taken must relate to the activity and take into account the requirements of the organisation and any other leave that the learning representative is taking or planning to take (ACAS, 2003: 17-24).

Carter (2002) has undertaken a regulatory impact assessment of placing ULRs on a statutory footing that has produced some interesting findings. He has come up with a cost benefit analysis that shows the benefits of giving statutory recognition and protection to learning representatives far outweighs the costs (immediate and long term) to the Government and employers.

The benefits are:

- More ULRs, rising from 3,000 in 2002 to 22,000 by 2010.

- A significant increase in learning activities with representatives having a significant impact in increasing the motivation and enthusiasm learning among both employees and employers.
- ULRs are particularly important in raising interest in training and development amongst the very low skilled employees and those with literacy and numeracy problems.
- Improved skills leading to increased confidence amongst employees and productivity which in financial terms have been estimated to be worth in the region of £70-140 million for the period 2002-2010.
- Improved employment relations with the work of the ULRs complementing that of human resource teams and promoting partnership working between employers and unions (Carter, 2002).

The costs have been calculated as follows:

- Costs to the Exchequer - £5 million for the period 2002-2010, to provide relevant training and support to ULRs as well as the costs of enacting, promoting and enforcing the legislation.
- Costs to employers for time off for ULRs - £23 million for the period 2002-2010.
- Costs to employers of administration - £3 million for the period 2002-2010 (Carter, 2002).

As Carter (2002) notes, the evidence of this impact assessment clearly demonstrates that the learning representatives' role "*...could be an important new development in raising skills levels of the workforce to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*".

## **Impact of ULRs in the Workplace**

Since the inception of ULRs there have been relatively few evaluations of how they have progressed and impacted upon their organisations, colleagues and their unions. This is significant as there are now over 4,500 trained ULRS (TUC, 2003). To date we have identified just four significant evaluations and surveys that have examined ULRs in any detail. These have been undertaken by Cowen, Clements and Cotter (2000) for the TUC; Ross (2000 and 2001) for the Manufacturing, Science and Finance (MSF) union and the LRD (2003), which can be regarded as a concise overview of developments to date. Our examination of the results, show that they have all broadly raised the same issues and produced similar findings. Taking these factors into consideration, we aim to highlight the key findings and issues raised by the Cowen et al. report, as it is the most detailed to date and covers a large number of learning representatives from a significant number of trade unions. The study was based on a questionnaire survey. 634 ULRs were sent questionnaires, 185 responded, which means there was a 29% response rate.

In relation to the demographic details of the ULRs, the researchers found that 62.1% were male, 37.9% were female; less than 2% were from ethnic minority groups; 45% were aged 45-59, whilst a further 39% were aged 35-44. 66% work in the private sector; 28% in the public sector and 6% in the voluntary sector. The study also identified that 12% of the representatives worked part-time and 60% worked in organisations with 200 or more employees (Cowen et al., 2000: 8-9).

In terms of where the learning representatives were located geographically (based on TUC Regions), the evaluation found that 33% were located in the North West; 26% in

London and the South East; 19% in Yorkshire and Humberside and 14% in the Midlands. As the authors explain; *“This distribution partly reflects the relative densities of unionisation across the TUC regions but also the relative strengths of the regional TUC Bargaining and Skills teams and where learning representative training programmes have been longer established”*. Interestingly, the study found that 91% of ULRs were active as union members in other ways such as being a shop steward, organiser or health and safety representative. The remaining 9% are new and are more likely to be female (Cowen et al., 2000: 10-11).

In relation to their skills and experience, the learning representatives highlighted the following as being most relevant to their role, 64.2% stated that knowing colleagues at work was the most important factor that they brought to their roles; 57.2% stated negotiating skills were a key factor and 40.9% highlighted a positive experience of returning to learning as another key factor (Cowen et al., 2000: 11).

With regard to their training, 92.5% of the ULRs were satisfied with the training they received for their new role, whilst 93.3% stated that to some degree they were utilising the skills acquired in the training to some degree (Cowen et al., 2000: 12-13).

In terms of how they used their time and the activities they were involved in, the representatives highlighted that 90% of them spent 5 or less hours per week on ULR duties; 71% promoted the value of learning to colleagues and 79% offered learning advice and guidance. Significantly, 50% of the ULRs were involved in negotiating learning issues with their employer and just under a half were involved in trying to access funding for learning (Cowen et al., 2000: 14-16).

Interestingly, the research revealed that 37.9% of the representatives offered support only to colleagues from the same union; just 12.4% offered support to any union member on their site and significantly 46.4% offered support to any employee within their workplace (Cowen et al., 2000: 16).

The researchers asked the ULRs to indicate which three activities they considered to be the most important for a learning representative and they came up with the following: promoting the value of learning to colleagues, Offering advice and guidance and negotiating learning issues with the employers (Cowen et al, 2000: 17).

The learning representatives were asked to identify the type of support they received from their union and the following in descending order of importance were highlighted: training and guidance (71%); information on new learning initiatives (58%); support from officers (54%); Networking opportunities (28%) and information on the activities of other ULRs (23%) (Cowen et al., 2000: 18).

The study also investigated the issue of support from employers and it must be noted that the results reflect the fact that at the time of the study, learning representatives had yet to be put on a statutory footing.

The researchers found that 70% of the representatives got paid time off for their ULR training, whilst 52.3% were given paid time off to carry out some of their duties and less than one third received other support such as access to rooms and equipment. Significantly, 22.3% of the representatives were dissatisfied with the support they received and within this group the female ULRs were found to be more dissatisfied

than their male counterparts. The representatives argued that they wanted more support in the form of more support from senior management; more time for ULR duties; more access to learning resources and more learning resource space and equipment (Cowen et al., 2000: 19-22).

The study investigated the impact and achievements of the representatives and found that 80.2% felt that their work was having a positive impact on learning in their workplace and it included helping colleagues improve their basic skills; improving the culture of learning at work; helping colleagues with little or no experience of learning and encouraging colleagues to continue learning. 31% also felt that their work was having other effects such as the positive impact on the culture of learning at work, but significantly, 19.2% of the ULRs felt that they were not making an impact (Cowen et al., 2000: 23-24).

The representatives were asked how their achievements were being monitored. 60% stated that they personally maintained records, whilst 75% could give an estimate of outcomes achieved, which included: promoting the benefits of learning; giving advice and guidance on learning; undertaking learning needs assessments; helping to access funding for learning; helping colleagues attend courses and open up ILAs (Cowen et al., 2000: 25-26).

Interestingly, the survey found that the representatives identified certain barriers with regard to their position. 78.6% stated that they faced some form of difficulty in carrying out their role. The key barriers that they identified are: lack of time for ULR activities; lack of interest or even suspicion from colleagues; lack of support from

management; problems in finding suitable courses to suit (shift) workers' needs; limited availability of ILAs, where these had been promoted as a method of supporting learners into learning and lack of formal recognition within the union structure (Cowen et al., 2000: 28-29).

The researchers asked the ULRs how the barriers to learning amongst their work colleagues could be lifted and to state the key factors that they considered would be most effective in motivating more colleagues to take part in learning activities. The representatives identified a number of factors but the four main ones were: paid time off for learning; funding to spend on learning; access to learning resources during work hours and encouragement from senior management (Cowen et al., 2000: 29-30).

Taking cognisance of the developments to-date as highlighted above, the researchers felt it imperative to investigate the current situation with regard to ULRs. To this end we undertook to investigate how the Learning Representatives of the civil service union the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) were faring. The second part of our study is dedicated to analysing the findings from our research.

### **The PCS Learning Representatives**

It was the intention of the researchers at this early stage of the enquiry to triangulate interview data with the union's own ULR evaluation study and policy documents. Interview data was collected from Learning Representatives attending a training course at PCS Headquarters. They were asked for their permission, which they readily gave and were interviewed in a group, the first a group of seven and the second a group of eight. In the first group there were six females of whom two had origins in

the Indian sub-continent and one male. In the second group there two males and one female of Indian sub-continental origin. As a group in this circumstance they were constituted by the discourse of trade unionism and its educational ideals and aspirations; as such then we do not record individual voices but the voices of those in the role of learning representatives. We treat the voices as a collective, "My voice can mean, but only with others: at times in chorus, but at the best of times in a dialogue" (Bakhtin, 1981: 165). The first group was interviewed by two of the researchers the second by one researcher, in each case field notes and tape recording was used. Tape recordings were subsequently transcribed.

A semi-structured interview/discussion schedule was drawn up using the policy documents on Union Learning Representatives and the evaluation study produced by PCS (PCS, 2002, 2003a and PCS Organising and Learning Services, 2003). The method chosen aimed to move from interviewing and towards open conversation and discussion, as a consequence the researchers sought to facilitate a dialogic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981: 165). In order to do this; it was important to create a conversational rather than interview scenario. Fortunately we were able to talk with the informants over a sandwich lunch and outside the semi-formal structure of the training session.

We were interested to find out why these workers had taken on this challenging role and how they viewed it. The following is representative of what the groups said.

### **Desire for learning**

This is a woman who had returned to work after having children.

*"I'm just enthusiastic about learning new things. (On the tape can be heard murmurs of agreement.) just dying to get out and do something with my brain...well computers are challenging so I looked for myself and enrolled on an OU course".*

In a similar vein another female respondent said;

*"Well I've always been curious but I left school and had a family but I couldn't wait to get back to something and this well it's for but its helping people."*

This desire for personal educational development was a feature of all our responses. Not all of them went as far as registering for Open University courses but they all wanted more than just skills updating related to work. Typically a male respondent commented on learning computer skills.

*"Well we need better skills because of computers and IT but you can do that and get things for yourself like when you do CLAIT 1 and 2."*

An original motivation then is a desire for, what used to be called self-improvement. There is of course a long history of trade unions seeking to ensure that its members had access to education, not just skills related to the work of trade unions but to liberal education as the continued Trade Union commitment to the Workers Educational Association and Ruskin College demonstrates. PCS Rules and Constitution Object 1g states as a role of the union "*... (to) promote the educational and cultural well being of members.*" (PCS, 2003b).

In line with this all of our informants were eager to improve their own education in the broadest sense. This general desire for learning is reflected in what the ULRs said their members asked them about. While their role as set out in statute and in the

surrounding guidance documents is to interact with colleagues and encourage them to update their work place skills.

*"I've been asked about all sorts of things you know flower arranging, keep fit and that."*

We were interested to know whether the ULRs felt they needed to know about the wide range of course available through Adult and Community Education and Further Education.

*"Yes we do find about other courses...you can get leaflets and that from colleges and the union has them as well. I think that once people get used to us they'll ask for more so we will need more training."*

The PCS survey of its own learning representatives reveals a rather similar picture. The survey received 94 replies out of 209, just under 30%. The wish list reported by the URL's contained art and craft, maths, tap dancing and aromatherapy among the twelve items specified (PCS Organising and Learning Services, 2003). This focus on "liberal education" is important in maintaining the enthusiasm and motivation of both URL's and their members and we will return to this later.

### **Re skilling industry and commerce**

The central government policy focuses on skill development such that industry and commerce become more productive and efficient and the learning representatives recognise that. The White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (1999) emphasises the role of trade unions in meeting development needs. *"Unions and work place representatives*

*have a crucial role to play in common cause with employers to ensure that individuals have the portable skills they need while meeting their immediate needs of business."*

Our informants recognise this.

*"Yeh course we need more skills like in the station everybody has to use computers but a lot are frightened of them...but people are afraid to say what they need to their managers in case they look idiots but they can say it to us....then we can encourage them to go on courses."* (Informant working in the police force).

The rest of group noted that the civil service highlighted the organisational needs that had to be met but that wasn't their only concern as we say above. The ULRs identified what were the most urgent demands for skills as result of their interaction with their members. All of our informants work in public service and all in offices, which are heavily dependent on Information Technology. In the light of this it came as little surprising that they identified IT skills as most urgent.

*"What people are asking for is more computer skills. They can sort of get along but they don't really understand about the machines...just looking at some one else or getting them to do it for you doesn't help because you can't do it next time."*

This demand for computer skills was also identified in the PCS survey where word processing was identified as having the highest demand followed by spreadsheets, Powerpoint and what are called other IT skills (PCS Organising and Learning Services, 2003). It is obviously in the interests of the organisation to provide courses that ensure that its employees have the skills that are needed but the provision of courses while necessary is not sufficient.

*"Well its sort of embarrassing to say you can't do it so what you do is ask someone else or just ignore it and hope it will go away. But even if someone helps you need a course because that way you can learn it properly. I think our job is to get people to say what they need then encourage them to ask for a course. A lot of people don't know that the courses are there for them they think you can't ask you have to be put up by the manager."*

It was put a different way by another informant;

*"What they do is trade skills but without computer skills you're out of the loop..tradings no good really. It doesn't work you do it for me and I'll do it for you it's always the same people doing the doing."*

This statement produced general agreement across the whole group and is typical of what was said at both sets of interviews. The ULRs made the point stridently that their conversations with members were confidential and that they would not reveal the content to managers. They also noted that the lack of skills led to lack of promotion opportunities and left the most vulnerable, often women in the lowest wage jobs but once people are confident they will go on courses and as a result improve their employment opportunities.

An intriguing explanation for the relatively high lack of skills was offered by one informant. Reflecting on the need to recruit community wardens he said that the Metropolitan Police were forced to recruit people who did not meet the entry skills criteria.

*"Look in London there's lots of jobs if you've got the skills and they aren't badly paid but public service is so what you can recruit in Newcastle you can't here...so the Met has to accept people it's going to have to give a lot of training to."*

When asked whether he thought that was true throughout the public services he thought yes and that it might account for the fact that people in the workforce would go on courses.

### **Strengths, Opportunities and Weaknesses**

It is relatively easy to write and agree policy documents. Implementation is a very different matter, so from the perspective of those doing the role what are its strengths? We noted above how the learning representatives felt they were able to talk with their colleagues. This aspect of being a trusted fellow worker who will keep what is said confidential is a major strength.

*"When I talk about skills and learning it's not a sort of formal thing not related to performance at work and that. You see people are used to managers telling them what they need and must do but when I talk they know I'm not doing that.. they know that because I've on the union a long time and they see me doing other things."*

It is not just confidentiality that is important but trust, in an old phrase feeling the strength of the union.

Learning representatives are also able to compare the practices in different work places.

*"I work in a building where like downstairs the manager is fine and supportive. He wants people to learn and go on courses so when I get people to ask he always says yes, well almost always. He knows what it's about. Upstairs it's a different world he*

*doesn't want them to get any better in case they leave and he doesn't understand what it's all about but I can talk to people and tell them about downstairs and then they feel they can ask."*

Overwhelmingly the success of the role will depend on the enthusiasm and willingness of the representatives and these informants express that in abundance.

*"It's really important job after being a steward the most important well that's why I'm so keen."*

Up to this point we have presented what the representatives said in a very optimistic light but not all is optimism. There are in built weaknesses in the role and difficult challenges for the representatives. While one representative spoke of how she and her manager had created a training policy for the office others pointed to difficulties managers caused. Most significant is the lack of understanding some managers have.

*"He thinks that my role is to tell him what people need and then to tell them to do it. He doesn't understand that I'm not management and what I do is different."*

All the representatives point to a problem with some managers who feel that they need to keep their staff, in their view if people develop skills they will be promoted and leave.

*"Not like the Germans they don't understand that getting skills is good for everybody."*

In the view of our informants many managers only pay lip service to the continuing development of knowledge and skills.

*"...and its not just managers it's like a lack of learning in the workplace it needs respect for learning (interjection a learning culture?) yes that's it."*

So at times both managers and members share a view that "getting by" is good enough, the updating of skills is for someone else.

When courses are provided during working hours some managers find great difficulty in releasing employees.

*"He (in this the case station sergeant) is enthusiastic and supportive until there is a course and then he says well what about cover...he sort of expects me to give him the answer but I'm not responsible for cover he is."*

Time is also a challenge. Representatives have to find time to talk to members and this can be lengthy particularly when the discussion involves the issue of basic skills. They also have to devote time to their own training and to finding out information for members.

In a sense it is rather too early to identify opportunities but the representatives identify some themselves. The role has enabled them to satisfy, in part, their own desire to engage with learning. They enjoy the opportunity to help people and see the role as part of their union commitment. On the whole they are optimistic and see the role as enabling the growth of a life long learning culture not just in the workplace but also outside it.

## **Discussion**

The origins of the policy of having ULRs lies in the historic and persistent view that the UK workforce lacks key skills. ULRs are in an interesting position in that they are able to point to the personal benefits to workers accruing from further professional development of skills. Our informants do this, for instance they negotiate with their managers to ensure that the professional skills courses offered by the employer meet the needs of the employees. Having said that ULRs also see themselves as “agitators” for lifelong learning.

One of our informants made the point that the idea of an Individual Learning Account was an excellent move, destroyed by allowing *"cowboys to run it"*. What he said was that for many people school had been a failure and that what was needed was a feeling that the learner was in charge, *"...the learning accounts would have worked if they had come through ULRs"*. Legislation has now given the ULRs a security not enjoyed by trade unionists in the past eager to offer educational opportunities to fellow members and this could be the most significant educational policy of the 21st century. Linked to this is the enthusiasm for learning in general expressed by the representatives, they have a vision of life long learning that goes beyond simply *"upskilling the workforce"*. It may be that for the first time trade unions will be able to enable their members to engage with education in the way they have always wanted.

The process by which ULRs have come into being is by definition democratic.

Therefore they are representatives of their fellow workers charged with the responsibility of enabling those workers to control their agenda for their life long learning and or professional development.

It may well be that in the case of the United Kingdom, it is the only example of democracy at work within formal and informal learning communities. Regardless of the agenda set by employers, our data demonstrates that ULRs are prioritised by the agenda set by their members.

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