Ableism: words, action and attitudes matter

The Social Model of Disability

The **social model of disability** focuses on the ways in which society is organised, and the social, institutional, communication and attitudinal barriers which restrict disabled people's opportunities. The social model **sees the person first** and argues that the barriers they face, in combination with their impairments, are what disables them.

The social model emerged in opposition to the medical model which focuses on the idea that disabled people are broken and need fixing because there is something 'wrong' with them and views **disability** as the limits that restrict participation in society on an equal level due to institutional, environmental and attitudinal barriers. An **impairment** is the physical, sensory or cognitive difference with which the disabled person lives. It describes a long-term condition that has an impact on daily life.

Challenging discrimination against all marginalised communities is central to the work of the union. Disabled people have long campaigned for equality and inclusion in all areas of society and still continue to do so, including challenging and opposing derogatory terms that perpetuate the systemic oppression against a group of people based on their differences from the perceived norm.

Ableism is a system of discrimination that oppression disabled people. It assumes a non-disabled 'norm' rather than recognising and supporting everyone in all our diversity.

It is manifest in a range of barriers that prevent disabled people from full participation in their communities and workplaces, from living independent lives and from accessing opportunities that non-disabled people take for granted.

Ableist language is, unfortunately, widely prevalent in society. It is sometimes used intentionally to insult, and other times takes the form of the casual use of negative stereotypes, phrases and assumptions about disabled people.

Here are some examples of ableist language:

- Using the word 'lame' to describe something disappointing
- "That's dumb!"
- "What are you, blind?"
- "What is wrong with you?"
- "Are you mentally ill?"
- "You seriously need help?"
- "What a nut job?"
- "Psycho!"
- "How can you be so stupid?"
- "Falling on deaf ears!"
- "Ha-ha, I'm so OCD"
- "Doesn't have a leg to stand on"
- "Take 5 mins to stretch your legs" – more commonly used during online meetings
- Calling someone a moron, retard, idiot, spastic, mental, imbecile
- Using phrases like 'that decision was crippling', or, telling an online audience to 'take 5 mins to stretch your legs '

This list is by no means exhaustive, and many of these phrases are widely used, often without recognising their impact on disabled people. The use of **inclusive language** is important to all oppressed groups.

The use of discriminatory language not only causes offence, it holds back disability equality and threatens long fought for gains.

It must not be used by others to belittle, or to silence the voices of disabled people. Anyone who uses discriminatory language should be challenged; this is where the social model of disability reinforces the importance of addressing the barriers that prevent disabled people from being included in work and social settings - including within UCU meetings. It applies to both members and staff alike.

In conjunction with UCU Disabled Members' Standing Committee, the following are **preferred terms** to use when speaking about disability and disabled people and follows the social model:

- Use **disabled people** not "the disabled", "people who are disabled" or "people with disabilities"
- Use **has a condition / impairment** not "suffers / suffering from" or "is afflicted with"
- Use **wheelchair user** not "wheelchair bound" or "confined to a wheelchair"
- Use **learning disability** not a "Downs Syndrome child/adult" or "special needs child/adult" or "high/low functioning"
- Use **non-disabled** not "able-bodied"

Avoid using:

- Normal and/or abnormal
- Afflicted with or suffering with or from…
- Handicapped, invalid
- Has a mental age of … - this type of language relates to the medical model of disability

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- Brave, special, or inspirational as this implies that a disabled person is inspirational just because they are disabled, which is patronising

While the above list is not exhaustive, it serves as a guide. As a general rule, avoid using passive language which implies that disabled people are victims – language needs to respect the fact that disabled people are active individuals in control of their own lives. If you are in any doubt about terms to use, speak first with a disabled person, it's better than making assumptions!

Deafness and Visually Impaired

Deaf (capital "D") is a political category and many Deaf people view themselves as a linguistic minority. Furthermore, the Deaf community often reject the term "impairment", as used in the social model, as Deafness is part of their culture and not regarded as an impairment, deficit or absence of hearing.

As with the Deaf community, many blind people are happy using the term "blind", while others may prefer to use "visually impaired".

Find appropriate words and use them! Try replacing words such as 'crazy' and instead use, absurd, surprising and unpredictable.   Small changes like these are important if we are going to challenge deeply rooted ableist assumptions about the value of disabled people's lives that can make a huge difference for a disabled person.

Taking these steps can help to ensure that disabled people are not excluded from conversations at work or within the union.

What can we all do to challenge ableism?

It is up to each of us to take responsibility and address where we are failing to meet our collective standards, and move to being in a place where conversations are inclusive and promote good practice.

Do…

- Use the **Accessibility Checklist** (https://www.ucu.org.uk/accessibility-checklist) to ensure that meetings and events, online and in person, are accessible and that they allow for full inclusion
- Try to embed good, inclusive and accessible practice in everything you do – this will be good for everyone and it will mean that disabled people are not singled out
- Listen to the voices of disabled people as they are best placed to advise on their needs
- Remember that disability is intersectional, seek out different views
- Challenge disability discrimination wherever it raises its head
- Be respectful of individual experiences
- Promote the social model of disability – watch our short film here (https://youtu.be/do6u1j1vryu)
- Challenge your own assumptions
- Promote disability equality

Don't…

- Challenge a disabled person about their disability when they disclose
- Assume you know what a disabled person needs
- Speak on behalf of a disabled person unless they ask you to do so
- Ask intrusive questions about a disabled person's health or what they can or cannot do

- Expect a disabled person to teach you everything about how to be inclusive
- Assume that a disabled person's life is any less diverse, complex, happy or sad than that of a non-disabled person

Ableism creates a hostile environment - it 'others' disabled people by suggesting that they are not equal or valued.   It allows others to make life changing decisions for disabled people about their health, education and how they live their lives. Ableism is not natural, it is the product of particular ways of working and living built around a non-disabled 'norm'. It is in our power to create an accessible society that values and provides opportunities for everyone.

Not challenging ableism, in everyday conversations and actions, reinforces the ideas and stereotypes that oppresses, isolates and marginalising disabled people. As a trade union, it is our responsibility to call out ableism whenever and wherever we see it.