

Branch guidance on environment reps

Introduction

This guidance has been published to assist UCU branches to fill the position of Branch Environment Representative. All branches are urged to appoint a member to take on this role. This will not be easy to achieve in the current period but we have experienced a rapid growth in numbers in the last couple of years. This reflects the fact that sustainability and climate change have been moving up the agenda and as a union we need to be in a position to respond. Much of the information in this guidance is taken from the UCU Environment Rep Handbook 'Staff Organising for Sustainability'. This and other resources are available on the UCU website: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/environment>

What's in a name?

UCU uses the term 'Environment Rep' but different names have been used to describe the role in different workplaces - 'Green Rep', 'Sustainability Rep', 'Climate Rep', 'Environmental Champion', 'Green Ambassador' etc. The term 'ambassador' or 'champion' implies too much of an individual approach rather than someone acting on behalf of the union. If there are members of staff with these titles they should not be used by the employer as a reason for refusing to recognise environment reps.

Why should branches appoint an environment rep?

Sustainability is an organising issue linked to decent jobs and social justice, both inside and outside the institution. It is an issue where unions can be pro-active on an agenda that can appeal particularly to younger members of staff.

'A hostile environment can detract attention from concerns not directly relating to labour issues or education fees. So it's all the more important that staff are represented by a trade union that has a progressive approach to, and active on climate change and social justice issues. This is why I joined UCU.'

Jo, UCL, London

It overlaps with a number of other areas of workplace organisation. For example, health and safety, particularly in the FE sector, often has the same management team and joint committees. Workplace issues like air quality are closely linked to environmental standards.

It provides a useful mechanism for linking up with the student body. The NUS and People & Planet have been very active on this issue and there are plenty of opportunities to forge strong alliances on issues as diverse as fossil fuel divestment and greening the campus.

These alliances will prove useful when the branch is looking for support on other union concerns.

'Trade union environmental reps play a vital role in greening institutions from within, ensuring that there is coordinated effort to engage colleagues in sustainability, as well as challenging institutions to do less bad and more good'

Dom Anderson, NUS Vice President Society and Citizenship

Is there a legal right to appoint environment reps?

There is no legal right to appoint environment reps. This means they do not have the same statutory rights as other branch officers like Health and Safety Reps and Union Learning Reps. UCU will continue to campaign for legal rights but we can't wait for that to happen. There is official guidance from the Advisory Conciliation and Advisory Service (ACAS) which has a reference to the role.

ACAS guidance 'Trade Union representation in the workplace' (Oct. 2009)

The role of environmental representatives and their needs

In some workplaces trade unions gain agreement from the employer to elect or appoint representatives with a specialist role. Environmental representatives focus on the climate change agenda and changes in work organisation and green workplace projects. They may serve on environmental committees if these are established. They can work to improve the impact of an organisation or workplace on the local environment, helping nearby communities and raising the reputation of the employer. (Page 12)

<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/s/r/Trade-Union-Representation-in-the-Workplace-accessible-version.pdf>

How do we convince the employer?

In the absence of legal rights branches are urged to make the case for recognition of the role. Points to consider include:

- Institutions should engage with staff on sustainability issues. Sector organisations have acknowledged the UCU role (ref. SOS guide below)
<http://www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=6743>
- The employer's sustainability and corporate social responsibility strategy documents and policies will have more credibility if there is a commitment to consult with staff unions.
- The implementation of sustainability policies will be more effective with union support and participation.
- There are many aspects of sustainability where a joint approach is more productive. For example unions have networks that go beyond the institution and can support an

institution's community engagement strategy.

- HE institutions will be able to support their responses to the Green League Table and obtain additional points (Ref. extract below).

People & Planet Green League Table

One of the Green League criteria under Student & Staff Engagement section is:

'Engagement with recognised Trade Union environment reps (eg. Green Reps) or engagement with trade unions on sustainability issues'

Clarifications:

- It is not sufficient to provide a letter from HR saying that staff members are entitled to have time off for union activities if requested. We require evidence that staff have actually taken time off/participated in trade-union linked sustainability activities.
- Points only awarded if union members confirm that they have received time off for sustainability-related training or events.

How do we find an environment rep?

The branch needs to have a flexible approach. The main requirement is someone who can raise issues with management, be consulted, and ensure action is taken.

There is considerable overlap with other branch duties. For example employer decisions on staffing levels may have implications for the ability of the institution to provide courses that deliver sustainability skills. A current branch officer may benefit from:

There may be branch members who are highly motivated about climate justice and sustainable development. Our experience is that they represent a new source of activists who may not previously have been a union rep. Finding people to take on the role will require planning and follow-up:

- ask if there is anyone working in a department or building who is interested in environmental issues
- distribute union material asking for expressions of interest with a contact point for follow-up.
- plan an event to raise interest among that group of staff.

Where individuals have expressed an interest there should be a discussion around what they are willing and able to do, and any arrangements for training and facilities.

'I took up the post of environmental rep to engage staff and students in environmental issues. I became the Branch Green Representative for UCU and have been busy leading initiatives in several directions to reduce energy consumption and generate an awareness of environmentally friendly issues within the college.'

Elaine, Salford University

What is an environment rep expected to do?

Even if a rep had full-time release for union duties they wouldn't be able to do everything in the job description. The important thing is that the branch and the environment rep select those activities that fit the following 3 criteria:

- i) it is something that interests the rep
- ii) it is something that interests the staff you represent
- iii) there is the prospect of making some progress.

UCU has broken down the functions into 4 Cs:

- Campus – the range of environmental management issues like energy, transport to work etc
- Curriculum – promoting education for sustainability into course programmes
- Community – engagement with local communities on sustainability issues like fracking
- Campaigns – Working with partners on issues like fossil free divestment

Further information on each of these functions is included in the handbook.

What about time off, training and other support?

Time off - Some branches have negotiated remission time to carry out the role. The amount of activity that can be taken on will be influenced by the topic and whether management are prepared to allocate time off. At the very minimum the branch can hopefully identify someone who is prepared to act as a point of contact for the region and national office.

ACAS guidance 'Trade union representation in the workplace' (Oct. 2009)

Environmental representatives have no statutory rights to time off, training or facilities. Appropriate training is available from trade unions and the TUC and the government sponsored Union Learning Fund is available to support approved training programmes for these representatives. In determining what time off, training and facilities should be agreed consideration needs to be given to the relationship between these specialists and other union representatives concerned with collective bargaining and ULRs. (Page 12)

<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/s/r/Trade-Union-Representation-in-the-Workplace-accessible-version.pdf>

Training - UCU offers training to new and existing reps. The current 3 day course is available as a blended learning module with one day in the classroom and the equivalent of 2 days online. Contact the UCU National Training Officer for further details.

Other support – UCU has established regional and country networks for environment reps. These networks are designed to bring environment reps together and exchange information and ideas. That's why it's important that when you do elect a new environment rep you let both region and head office know so that we can keep our network lists up to date.

What next?

Use the checklist below to review the current state of play and if you need any further information please contact Graham Petersen: gpetersen@ucu.org.uk

Branch checklist

Does your employer recognise the role of environment rep? Check whether:

- it is referenced in an agreement
- it is referenced in a policy document
- it has been carried out in the past and there is any custom and practice.

Is there anyone in the branch leading on this currently? Check whether:

- any environmental functions are carried out by any existing branch officers.
- if the post is currently vacant sound out views on members who may be interested.
- encourage the branch to agree that the person can attend the Branch Committee and/or have the post adopted as a formal role and advertised for election at the subsequent AGM
- notify your regional office of the branch member appointed as the environment rep.
- check what committee(s) deal with sustainability issues within the institution.
- notify the employer of the branch member appointed to lead on this.

August, 2015