

Trade unions make you happy

Trade unions are the only show in town when it comes to protecting your job and your sanity at work. This is a statement of fact, rather than a delusional belief built up by an early flirtation with left wing politics. Here's why.

Trades unions are hands down the largest membership organisations in the world. When fighting global poverty means taking on an entire economic machine, size really matters.

There are less redundancies and higher pay in workplaces where there are unions. A simple fact.

Without a union most people are unlikely to know about or access their human rights to a decent job and decent treatment. Another simple fact.

There are over 200,000 trade union representatives in this country, ranging from elected leaders, paid officials to lay representatives. All of them deal with the daily realities of conflict, redundancies, grievances and outright despair. Nobody goes to see their rep with good news. The nature of the work is inherently stressful and as the world spirals, reps

are faced with what we politely call “managing membership expectations”. There is a universal correlation between desperation and the desire for magic solutions, with the improbability of finding them hard on the old ego, especially for reps who are in the job to actually help people.

Having worked for trade unions most of my adult life, I observe that employment relations within trade unions are often a complex and contradictory mix of the very best and worst of management practices. Most trade unions are defensive and for good reason. To protect themselves and their memberships they don't open up much, don't do defeat and never ever admit to things going belly up. That's understandable on an organisational level but for the people that work for them it can be disastrous, pushing underground any problems, particularly the mental kind. When your job in life is dealing with the dirty business of conflict feeeeeeeeelings can easily be denied, putting reps in a precarious position in terms of their own survival at work.

Anxious, us? Not really, because trade unions and the people in them are fundamentally resilient. Let's spell that one out.

Trade unions do anger. A key function of trade unions is to articulate problems and not be coy about saying it as it is. Having worked for a General Secretary known internationally as “Fred and his bag of f****ks” I can tell you now that I have never seen anyone evoke such devotion from membership precisely because he expressed their anger. This is

very important in a situation of redundancy where the shame that should be felt by employers is pushed onto the people losing their jobs. It's only by acknowledging that something is wrong and getting angry about it, we can move on. If you don't get angry you can say goodbye to defending what's right and anything resembling positive change.

Trade unions are realistic: Trade unions are fundamentally realistic organisations because they have to negotiate with employers. This always means compromise. Trade unions work on the pragmatic principle that something is better than nothing and when you've got nothing that means a lot. Being realistic = living in the real world = sane, a rare quality in today's workplace.

Trade unions tackle stigma: Mental illness is the last taboo at work. If you're in any doubt about that try to have a conversation with your colleagues about the words "mental illness" and you could find yourself time-tunnelled to a conversation about race in a rural post office in Gloucestershire in the 1970s. Trade unions stand up for principles, including the one that says that you shouldn't lose your job because you're human. This inevitably means daily work tackling victimization and discrimination and being on the receiving end of a fair amount of human bile yourself. Trade unionists are mighty fine at taking it on the chin. They also offer the only confidential and secure place to go if you are in psychic trouble. People do not go to Human Resources to say they are depressed, but they often go to their trade union rep. Hardly need to spell that one out for you.

Trade unions are social capitalists: Given the state of the global economy I'm not sure that's in any way funny but it is important. Trade unions offer us a relationship where we are allowed to ask for help and expect a decent response. You can't say that about most relationships when you're in a work crisis. I don't think I'm being too gothic to suggest that often the people that we like and love can let us down when we most need it. That's especially true when you're in a bad way mentally, not a good look and probably not the time to start internet dating. Often trade union reps are the only person that someone can speak to about their crisis. This social function is profoundly needed by working people and most reps take it on with the compassion and humility that it deserves.

I'm not suggesting that the next branch meeting is devoted to primal screaming or a group hug but I am suggesting that we build our trade union resilience. Without trade unions and the thousands of representatives that work for them, we don't survive work.