

Why Unions Matter

Fighting for Justice and Fairness in the Workplace for Social Workers



Lisa Fitzpatrick, a SWU Advice & Representation Service Trade Union Officer shares her views

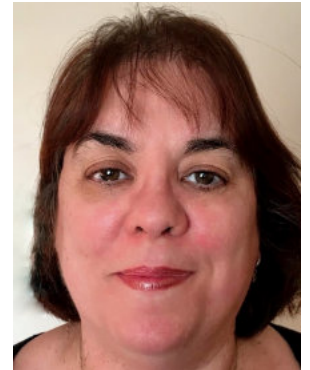
This year the Social Workers Union celebrates its 10th anniversary. We should celebrate the continued role of the labour movement in fighting for the rights of workers and the work we have achieved and with our members. I am proud to work as a Trade Union Officer of the Advice and Representation team working on behalf of the Social Workers Union (an organisational member of BASW) and passionate about working for a Trade Union with the values of social justice and equality as its core, to protect and support social workers.

I qualified in 1993 on the last CQSW course, in the North East at a time when managerialism in social work was on the rise and trade unions and workers' rights were under attack from the Thatcher government. I grew up with the stark memories of the miners' strike and heavy police presence, and how the full might of the power of the state was used against striking miners and the unions. In London in 1986, the same battle took place in Wapping with Murdoch's media war on the print unions. Levels of inequality and discrimination, poverty, and unemployment were high in Thatcher's Britain, along with the growth of far right movements in inner city London with anti-racist/fascist movements leading the way in the fight against racism. This shaped my view of the world; for working people the labour movement represents hope and legitimate rights of challenge and campaigning for change.

Since the 80s and 90s, the trade union movement has faced many challenges such as the contraction of many well unionised industries, the changing nature of employment, privatisation of most nationalised industries, and the increasing use of private contractors in many public services. The Conservative government has during its power been openly hostile to trade unions, legislating against them. Employers (from both the private and public sector) often have a more aggressive and adversarial attitude towards unions and shop stewards who are defending the terms and conditions of their members.

Despite these challenges, union membership has risen for a third year running at 6.4 million, with female membership now the highest it's been since 1995. Now more than ever unions have restated their importance and relevance over the last few months during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unions have been at the forefront in protecting jobs and livelihoods by persuading the Government to introduce the Job Protection Scheme and are now leading the way in making sure that workers return to safe workplaces.



Trade unions have a vital role in any society in collective bargaining and to a fairer society and equitable economy and labour market.

Unions continue to campaign to save jobs and protect industries such as the hospitality industry during the pandemic and have big wins for workers such as the recent win for workers in the gig economy. The GMB victory over Uber means drivers will no longer be classified as self-employed, but are workers entitled to workers' rights including holiday pay, a guaranteed minimum wage, and breaks.

Membership has increased for the Social Workers Union too, and it is one of the fastest growing trade unions with close to 15,000 members. SWU (unlike BASW) has a legal right for its Advice and Representation Officers to attend and represent. **We are trained and qualified social workers who advocate and negotiate on behalf of social workers, and who have a shared understanding of the impact of austerity on managers and service users.** This right is contained in Section 10 of the Employment Relations Act 1999 and is supported by the Acas Code of Practice.

The growth of managerialism has seen the working conditions of social workers under attack.

We see this played out in day to day working lives, affecting morale and job satisfaction. *"Managerialism is an approach to the workplace that has grown up as part of neoliberalism thinking. It involves focussing on targets and performance targets to try and make public service management as much like business management as possible...."* (Thompson and McGowan, p43)

The impact has led to *“huge pressures on social work managers trying to support overstretched practitioners in highly demanding circumstances.”* (Thompson and McGowan, 2020, p42 - 1) Pressures fall on social workers who face more demands, unrealistic workloads, long hours of work, limits on resources available, and hostility from the public if they cannot access services or receive less than they may expect, with frequent staff changes across the pay grades. This has in turn created a “victim blaming culture” in some organisations and toxic cultures where staff feel devalued and inadequate.

It is in this context that the Advice and Representation team continue to promote and support our members with formal employment matters/processes such as grievances involving bullying and harassment and/or discrimination in the workplace, capability issues, and disciplinary processes - to name just a few. We support our members to prepare and attend a wide range of meetings with their employer. This can often be a significant time for the member in helping to shift the balance of power.

Some employers can be fairer than others and the SWU Union Representative will challenge poor practice and where processes are not followed in a fair and just way.

Members are supported to utilise fully the processes available, to ensure their issues are fully heard, and to seek resolution wherever necessary. Members often start to feel they have more control which can ease symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Members frequently come to us facing a crisis at work; some say they feel scared and fearful of HR processes being used by their employer, including those facing capability (performance) processes and disciplinary investigations and hearings. Some say they feel their employer is “out to get them” and its being “done to them” in a draconian and oppressive manner. Members can initially feel overwhelmed, frustrated and disempowered. This is especially the case for members who are suspended from work at home - feeling hopeless with worry, facing loss of their daily work routines, and identity at work at the same time. Many members are also juggling self-care and the needs of their family at a time of heightened stress in the pandemic. This leads to physical and emotional stress, anxiety, depression, lack of sleep, and affects all members across the pay grade.

The impact of work processes can mirror the loss and grief stages (Kubler-Ross, 1969) with members often feeling shock and numbness at the early stages, moving on to anger, embarrassment or shame, to

depression, detachment, helplessness, lack of energy, and at other stages some members begin to reach out to others for support with dialogue and bargaining. Many members describe a crisis point in their life which causes them to re-think their identity and their future in social work. This can lead to the member making life-changing decisions or thinking about how to protect themselves in their work in future and can be an empowering stage too. Some have sought further support such as coaching or counselling to re-build resilience.

At these stages, members are supported to take some time and space to prepare for any formal meetings ahead and to consider the planning and how they want to present their views. This may include some reflection, writing a chronology of events, and referring to any policies that may assist them. Members are encouraged to collect evidence to support their narrative and value opportunities to ask questions and clarify HR processes. For example, what is a Stage 2 sickness meeting? Why is it being called now? What are the agenda items? Who will attend the meeting? What support can the employee ask for and what is available? Has the OH made recommendations/has the employer implemented these? If not, why not? What has the employer implemented regarding readjustments?

The union rep can support to clarify all information required and this becomes more reassuring for members who begin to engage further in processes. Disciplinary hearings are also very stressful for members who have excellent skills advocating for services users but often find it harder to focus on their own needs largely because of stress and anxiety. Preparation is also the key for any hearing - to understand processes as laid out by the employer and ensuring the member has considered the allegations fully, their opposing arguments and challenges, mitigating factors, along with key evidence and relevant witnesses, and the employer has given sufficient time for preparation.

Other members come to us for advice on taking grievances - they feel they have tried to resolve matters informally with their managers, but now feel want to take further action or to consider their options. This is often a proactive step as members are using formal processes to seek resolution. Some members feel they have no choice but to actively take steps and are anxious or in turn feel angry and let down by their organisation. Many members have felt this was an important process in enabling them to be heard by their employer on grievance issues such as a lack of support, poor supervision, a lack of readjustments for a disability, organisation issues such as changes of hours to work and role, and bullying and harassment claims.

At the recent SWU survey in Jan 2021 - members said that 92% said that advice and representation is absolutely vital for social workers.

One member elaborated on their answer by saying, "*The majority of social workers do not challenge service cuts or care packages being declined as they have seen others being ousted and being labelled a renegade.*

Representation by the SWU is vital in such circumstances... I would encourage my colleagues to join the SWU to at least have a telephone service to discuss this with."

1. *How to Survive Social Work* - Neil Thomson and John McGowan
2. *On Death and Dying* - Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1969
3. Social Workers Union (SWU) Member Survey 2021: <https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2021/feb/social-workers-union-swu-member-survey-2021>

