



Facility time in facts & figures

It's time to explode some of the Tory myths about facility time

Facility time is under attack

While it might be tempting to dismiss some of those leading the attack – such as the self-proclaimed Trade Union Reform Campaign, a close relative of the so-called Taxpayers' Alliance – as little more than flannelled fools, many Conservative MPs have been successful in getting their local press interested in the alleged cost of facility time, particularly in local government. And in Swindon, we have seen the Tory council take the attack into practical steps with its announcement that it is ending facility time.

The supposed narrative is always the same: in a time of tight finances, taxpayers are subsidising trade unions to the tune of hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of pounds by paying the wages of trade union officials who should be paid by their employer - the union.

We don't need to tell the readers of UNISON InFocus that this is rubbish: you know that you are employees of councils, the NHS, police forces, universities, colleges, schools, utilities, transport providers and a host of private and third-sector companies – and rightly paid by them while you provide voluntary support for your fellow workers and union members. But it is a view that is – alarmingly – gaining traction. On top of a steady drip of stories from mainly Conservative MPs and councillors in local papers, communities and local government secretary Eric Pickles has made it clear that he has union reps and their facility time in his sights.

So branches need the true facts to fight back against local attacks.

First some basic facts: there are 6.5 million trade union members in the UK – around 200,000 of them volunteer to carry out representative duties at workplace level, carrying out a wide range of often demanding and complex roles, including;

- providing informal advice to colleagues;
- formally representing members in grievance and disciplinary hearings;
- negotiating with managers.

Union reps – in the private, public or voluntary sector have a legal right to paid time off for a tightly defined set of union duties, including:

- negotiating with employers;
- representing members;
- performing the duties of an accredited health and safety rep;
- performing the duties of an accredited union learning rep.

They also have a legal right to paid time off for training to carry out those duties. There is no legal obligation on employers to provide paid time off for union reps taking part in what the law calls 'union activities' – things like attending meetings, taking part in their union's democracy, recruiting new members etc. But many employers – again in both the private and public sectors – recognise the value of giving elected union reps facility time for this, up to 100% in a minority of cases.

As Ian Jerams, chief operating officer, Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust said in a recent TUC report: "Effective and efficient services require a workforce that is supported to deliver their very best. "The provision of facility time for staff representatives and stewards helps to ensure the timely availability of representation, leading to the early resolution of staffing issues and ultimately to better outcomes for the workforce, employers and for the people benefiting from the service."

And is this benefit measurable?

The last attempt to do so was in 2007, when the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform – now the Department for Business Innovation and Skills – conducted a review of the facilities and facility time available to workplace representatives. It concluded that, for every £1 spent on trade union facility time in the public sector, between £2 and £5 is saved in costs of dismissal and exit rates. That is a very good return on investment. This doesn't include the benefit of union reps to productivity performance, which is widely acknowledged but harder to calculate.

The government calculation of benefits was broken down as:

- lower dismissal rates, which meant recruitment savings of £107m-£213m a year;
- lower 'voluntary exit' rates, meaning further recruitment savings of £72m-143m a year;
- fewer employment tribunals, saving government between £22m and 43m a year;
- fewer workplace-related injuries, saving employers £126m-371m a year;
- fewer workplace-related illnesses, seeing savings of £45m-207m a year.

At 2004 prices (these were the figures the 2007 study looked at) those add up to saving of between £372m and £977m a year in both the public and private sectors. Working on the basis that the public sector is 'worth' around 60% of the total, union facility time arrangements saved the taxpayer 223m-£586m a year at 2004 prices, or £267m-£701m at 2010 prices.

And how much time do reps actually take?

The same 2007 government review found that the average work time taken by senior union reps was just over 10 hours a week – while a 2005 TUC survey showed 16% of reps saying that less than quarter of the time they spent on union duties was paid for by their employer.

For more information, see the TUC reports *The Facts about Facility Time for Union Reps* (Oct. 2011)

tuc.org.uk/tucfiles/108/TheFactsAboutFacilityTime.pdf and

Facility Time for Union Reps – Separating Fact from Fiction (Jan. 2012)

tuc.org.uk/tucfiles/206/FacilityTimeSeparatingFactfromFiction.pdf

A UNISON branch guide can be downloaded at unison.org.uk/file/Facility%20

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