

Can unions save the planet?

Workplace Report February 2007

The scientific consensus is now overwhelming: climate chaos is a certainty unless carbon emissions are drastically reduced. We find out how union reps are making a difference at workplace level.

When the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its fourth report earlier this month, it confirmed that excessive levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere will raise global temperatures by more than 2°C over the next generation. If current trends continue, the volume of greenhouse gases could more than treble by the end of the century, leading to an increase in global temperatures of nearly 6°C.

The consequences of climate change will be catastrophic across the world, and the only way to stop it happening - or at least lessen its severity - is to cut carbon emissions.

At present, the biggest sources of greenhouse emissions are power generation (24%), land use (18%) and transport, industry and agriculture (all 14%). Some of these are matters way beyond reps' control, but the TUC points out that over half the UK's energy (including 80% of its lighting energy) is directly used in the workplace, and workers commuting by car also have a heavy carbon "footprint". It is clear, therefore, that the workplace is an area where significant action on carbon emissions can be taken.

#### Union action

Trade unionists have already taken positive steps to help reduce carbon emissions. The Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC) was set up in 1998 as a forum for consultation between government and trade unions on environmental issues. It has held conferences and published a report, *Greening the workplace*, to promote examples of worker-friendly environmental good practice (see Workplace Report, December 2005).

And towards the end of last year, the TUC launched its Greenworkplaces project (see box) and published *First steps to a greener workplace*, a guide for reps wishing to raise green issues with their employers.

#### Greenworkplaces

With financial support from the Carbon Trust, last year the TUC launched six pilot projects to increase union involvement in environmental activism. The workplaces involved were the British Museum, TUC, DEFRA, Friends Provident, Scottish Power and Corus.

Peter Clennell, a rep from PCS civil service union at the British Museum, told LRD how the union helped to get 200 staff to an environment open day. More than 80 PCS members have been identified as environment reps, and the first 20 began their

training last month. The union plans to carry out an environmental audit, with a view to reducing the museum's carbon footprint of 8,000 tonnes a year.

For more information on the Greenworkplaces project, call Caroline Molloy at the TUC on 020 7467 1332.

#### UK workplaces aren't green

Last month the Labour Research Department (LRD) surveyed union reps to assess how much progress is already being made. Of the 500-plus replies, three-quarters (76%) were from reps in the public sector - with those in central government alone accounting for a third (32%). Reps from the PCS public and commercial services union, Prospect professionals' union, the CWU communication workers' union and the UCU lecturers' union responded in significant numbers. And over half (55%) of respondents worked in offices.

The overall findings make sobering reading: fewer than a fifth of employers (19%) have comprehensive recycling schemes in place, and only one in nine (11%) has a comprehensive energy efficiency scheme.

Almost two-thirds of employers (63%) have done nothing to promote green transport policies, and more than half have been equally inactive on water conservation (57%) and green purchasing (51%). And a third of employers have done nothing to minimise waste or the use of resources (both 34%).

Fewer than a quarter (23%) of reps reported that their workplace has an environmental management system - and only 10% of those with such a management system said the union was involved with it. Union involvement in "green" issues is generally low:

- \* only 32% of respondents said the union has been involved in environmental improvement measures in their workplace;
- \* 19% said environmental issues are part of the bargaining agenda in their workplace - with 53% sure that they are not;
- \* 15% said there was a joint management/union agreement on environmental issues in their workplace;
- \* 25% reported getting time off for training and duties regarding the environment; and
- \* 10% said they have attended training on environmental issues.

However the survey did find some examples of good practice, many of which could be copied in other workplaces.

#### Waste and recycling

According to the reps we surveyed, the most common type of workplace environmental measure is a recycling scheme.

At a minimum level, this involves recycling paper and/or using recycled paper. Some reps reported that their workplaces provide for colour paper as well as white paper to be recycled. And UCU rep Rachel Shanks said that, to ensure that all paper is recycled, some offices at Aberdeen University do not have any waste bins.

Some workplaces are more ambitious with their recycling. Another UCU rep, Helen Donoghue, explained that University College London (UCL) has "direct recycling streams for paper and for bottle glass, although the potential for other streams is constantly under review. Other waste streams are subject to increasing levels of pre-disposal conditioning by the waste disposal contractor. Batteries are removed from the hazardous waste stream and sent for recycling, and fluorescent tubes are processed to recycle the mercury content. The shreds of confidential waste are sent for paper recycling, and the domestic waste is sorted to remove metal and other recoverables."

UCL also sends items for reuse rather than recycling where possible, Donoghue said. Toner cartridges may be sent for remanufacture, the college's Procurement Services department accepts some office furniture for reuse, computers are donated to a charity for refurbishment and shipment to developing countries, and gas cylinders may be refilled by the manufacturer, BOC. Additionally, "some companies operate a take-back system of packaging or of catalogues, but this is a local arrangement".

Krik Urquart, a safety rep for the T&G general union, described the arrangements at pharmaceuticals firm GlaxoSmithKline: "1) Metals graded and reused, rest is sold for scrap. 2) Used solvents recovered via distillation process. 3) Exact packaging quantities dispensed for use. 4) Waste solvent burned in own boiler system to create steam for site heating and hot water. 5) Paper and plastics sent to recycle-able manufacturer."

Adopting recycling practices such as these can have dramatic benefits: Prospect safety rep David Bowen reported that Magnox Electric has reduced the amount of waste going to landfill by 60% through recycling.

However, cost is widely seen as the biggest barrier to recycling. Anthony Salt, a CWU rep at Royal Mail, said that his sorting office introduced a recycling scheme for about 12 months until management "found out they would have to pay extra to have it collected!" And Tim Smith, a PCS rep at the Maritime Coastguard Agency, told us that his workplace is awaiting a paper recycling facility because the local council has refused to collect from small businesses without payment.

#### Cutting back on consumption

Using fewer resources in the first place is at least as important as reusing or recycling them, and a number of reps reported successes in this area.

For example, toilets use huge quantities of water, but Prospect rep Alec Batchelor told LRD that the Met Office uses rainwater to flush its toilets, while fellow Prospect rep Bill Bates explained that his workplace has installed "water miser controls" on the toilets. Other reps reported on the installation of toilets that use little or no water at all.

Two more Prospect reps described modest energy-saving measures: Archie Munro reported that SP PowerSystems Ltd has signs reminding people to switch off lights and equipment, while David Livesey said the manufacturing shops at BAe Systems have light sensors that switch off when there is sufficient natural light available.

Other practices cited by reps include using low-energy light bulbs, switching off lights and plug points at lunch and the end of the day, and improving building insulation. And UCU rep Christopher Totten told us that the North East Institute has installed a computer-controlled central heating system.

A few workplaces are looking to generate their own energy: the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council is looking to meet part of its energy needs with renewable sources such as wind, and T&G rep Andy Green reported that the Port of Tilbury is to install three 90-metre wind turbines.

Consumption of other resources can also be reduced: PCS rep Michelle Brierley-Davies highlighted the British Council's efforts to save paper by adding the footer "Do you really need to print this e-mail?" to its messages, while a UCU rep revealed that Thames Valley University has cut down on packaging by linking its water coolers to mains water.

#### Transport

Work-related transport is another area where carbon emissions can be reduced. Helen Flanagan, a PCS rep at the Pensions Service, told LRD that the union has "actively sought management to install an additional bike shed so members can ride to work, carried out a survey and arranged for management to install a shower".

Other workplaces have introduced facilities and initiatives to encourage cycle use. At UNISON public services union's "Green the Workplace" conference last month, Caroline Fife reported on measures to promote cycle use at the University of Brighton, for example. As the branch's environment officer, she has negotiated for secure cycle storage - including cages with stands and covers - on all four university sites, with a common key across all the sites to padlock the gates. The union has also negotiated an interest-free cycle loan, that also covers locks and helmets, and has plans for getting good-quality lockers and other facilities installed on work sites.

Where car use is necessary, energy-efficient models can be bought. Prospect rep Richard Williams informed us that dual-fuel and hybrid cars feature in the Natural Environment Research Council's transport pool. And PCS rep Tony Brazier reported that the Government Office for the South East has also invested in dual-fuel cars, as well as adopting successful policies to increase employees' use of public transport.

Jane Goode, a Prospect rep, told LRD that a car-sharing scheme is in place at the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. Video conferencing facilities have been set up so that staff need not travel to meetings, and two electric vans have been bought for on-site use. And Sean Olley, a T&G safety rep at Millennium Chemicals, informed us that the company provides a bus to get day and shift workers to and from work.

A lot more remains to be done, however: few reps reported that their employers offer help with public transport costs (by providing season ticket loans, for example). And working practices, especially in multi-site organisations, often make it difficult for workers to adopt green methods of transport - UCU rep Bill Hutchinson said that discussions on how staff commute between sites at Hopwood Hall College are "going nowhere fast", and Prospect rep Stuart Clark told us that reorganisations at his employer have meant that "more people travel to offices a long way from where they live than ever before".

Howard Green, a Prospect rep at EDF energy made a similar point: "A policy of relocating staff and reducing business mileage is not environmentally friendly as it increases private mileage."

#### Problems with employers

A number of different types of union rep take on environmental work (see box below), and their status is important when it comes to getting time off to pursue the issues in work time, since some reps have more legal rights to time off than others.

Most reps reported that they can use their existing arrangements to secure time off for environmental matters, but others said that no formal agreement is in place - and a handful (2%) revealed that they have problems getting time off for training.

Some reps also highlighted difficulties with their employers' attitude to the environment. PCS rep Neil Harrison, for example, told us that the Department for Work and Pensions' idea of minimising resources was "to cut staff".

While UCU and UNISON reps at City College in Manchester have set up a joint trade union environment group, with an e-mail discussion list and a long list of priorities, managers have failed to deliver on their promise to set up a working party. "We have send them a long list of requests on various environmental issues and are awaiting feedback," noted UCU rep David Swanson.

There is also scepticism about employers' motivation for taking action on environmental issues. As Tricia Gott, a UCU rep at Bradford College, put it: "If the employer was to take a 'green' stance, it would probably be for other reasons (e.g. ban car parking so that the car park space can be utilised differently), not necessarily for environmental reasons."

#### Who cares about the environment?

Our survey found that many types of union rep take up environmental issues, with lines of responsibility not always clearly defined. Brian Quensell, a CWU rep at Royal Mail, summed up the ambiguity when he said that "environmental issues are sometimes left to other people".

Some take responsibility for these issues as part of their wider role as a branch secretary or workplace rep; others in their capacity as a health and safety rep. And

T&G steward Keith Shaw said that the preferred route at the Scottish and Newcastle Brewery is through union learning reps.

Whatever their status, these "environment reps" fulfil important roles. Eoin Shalloo, a Prospect rep at the National Library of Scotland, has carried out a staff survey and helped to organise a "green day" as part of a "Learning at Work" week. And UCU rep Cath Hepburn ran a "Unions and the environment" conference at City of Sunderland College in December.

David Smith, a CWU rep in Royal Mail, has used health and safety risk assessments as a means of raising environmental issues. And Paul Bell, a GMB rep at BAe Systems, has organised a "green weekend" as well as negotiating a four-day week (less overtime) so that the factory uses less energy.

Polly Heron, a PCS rep at HM Revenue and Customs told us that reps made use of health and safety procedures in 2002 by serving a Union Improvement Notice on her building for poor heating and air quality. This suggests that a similar scheme of "Workplace Environment Improvement Notices" could be developed to tackle specifically environmental concerns.

Environment reps are also using different bargaining forums to bring green issues to employers' attention. Dave Locking, a PCS rep at the prison service, reported that an Environment Management Committee has been set up in his workplace, but others indicated that environmental issues are usually discussed with management through health and safety committees: Christine Burnett, a Prospect safety rep at Sellafield nuclear plant, told LRD that "we have an agreement that safety work can include environmental", while Ian Clark, Prospect rep at the UK Atomic Energy Authority, commented that "safety and the environment go together".

#### More to be done

Nevertheless, our survey found that good environmental initiatives are being implemented in many workplaces. The public sector provided some of the best examples, but private sector reps have also shown that it is possible to secure improvements.

And reps do not need to focus on just one area - some told us of integrated campaigns in their workplaces. PCS rep Gaynor Barradell, for example, reported that the Land Registry has adopted "a recycling centre in the car park, low voltage lighting, tinted windows, no air conditioning, temperature-controlled heating, one bin per four workers' desks, all paper and card goes to recycling bins and drinks cups reused then recycled". Another rep listed the following activities: "Bike sheds supplied and bike buying scheme, discount/payment scheme for bus passes, signs up about water and electric use, boilers for instant hot water and chill machines on mains water, not bottled. Purchasing constantly being reviewed to include sustainable and ethical choices. Replacement furniture is donated to local charities and schools."

What is clear, however, is that workplace measures are taking place on nowhere near the scale necessary to cut carbon emissions. It is vital for unions to negotiate agreements and organise campaigns, particularly on:

- \* framework agreements that commit employers to implementing environmentally friendly policies, consulting workers and giving union environment reps rights to take up these issues in the workplace;

- \* energy efficiency agreements covering equipment use, workplace temperature and lighting and water use;

- \* waste disposal agreements covering recycling, toilets and landfill; and

- \* travel agreements covering cycling, public transport, car-sharing and walking.

- \* First steps to a greener workplace can be downloaded from [www.tuc.org.uk/economy/tuc-12460-f0.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/economy/tuc-12460-f0.pdf)