



My Union,

My Voice!



Inspiring stories from
young union reps



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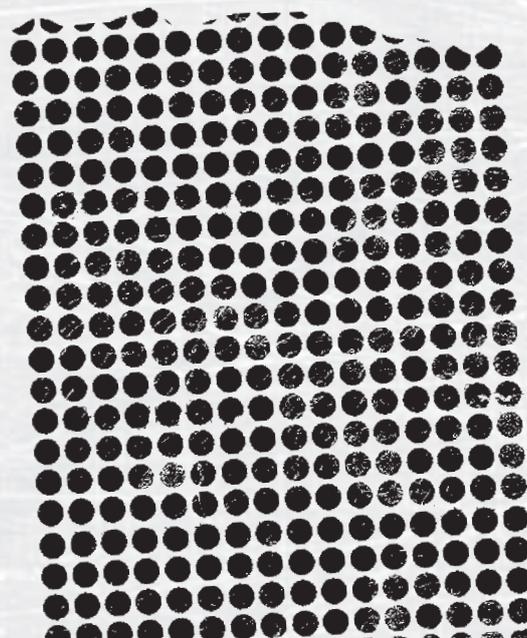


Our Social Media

www.tuc.org.uk
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Interviews by Astrid Stubbs



TUC General Secretary

Frances O'Grady

Increasing union membership amongst young workers is one of the key challenges faced by unions in the UK today.

Just over one in four workers generally are members of a union. That figure falls to one in 12 for those aged 24 or younger.

Yet these workers are often the most vulnerable, facing problems of low pay, poor access to decent training and apprenticeships, exploitative internships, and difficulties in the housing market. Unions can help with all these issues.

Sometimes there is no union to join where young people are working. But many just don't see the connection between the jobs they do, the problems they face, and the support a trade union can offer.

So we must reach out to workers in sectors where union presence is limited; and where there is none we must demonstrate our relevance to young workers. That means showing a face of trade unionism to which young workers can relate.

"inspiring
the next
generation of
union members
and activists"



This set of case studies, published to mark the first ever TUC Young Workers' Month, when we will be promoting union membership and activity amongst young people, tells the stories of young trade unionists who, as well as joining a union, joined in too.

They are young workers who combine their trade union work with a variety of jobs in both the public and private sector: from firefighting to musical theatre, manufacturing to call centre work.

I hope the stories told in My Union, My Voice and the example set by the young workers it features can play a significant part in inspiring the next generation of union members and activists.

Communication Workers' Union

Alpesh Patel



What brought you into contact with the union?

Fear of redundancy from my sales job with a Walsall company in 2012. In hindsight, prior to that my lack of knowledge about the importance of unions was embarrassing. The idea of redundancy really threw me. I didn't know what I was going to do. It was quite scary.

Did you lose your job? Yes but the union helped me secure an extra 30 days of pay. While I was preparing for various meetings over the redundancy, I met my local union rep and she

was impressed with the work I'd done for the case and told me, "You've done my job for me – there's no need for me to be here!", which was quite reassuring! She also asked me if I'd like to be more active in the union.

So how did that happen? Within a month I'd started my new job with BT at Sandwell and on my first day of training I coincidentally crossed paths with the same rep in my workplace canteen! I was quite shocked but happy to see her. She encouraged me to get training and join education courses with the union which would be accommodated by BT – so 2012 was a big year for me because I was made redundant but lots of positive things came from it and it's where my union education and learning really started.

And what are you doing now? Last year I was given full-time facility time to represent colleagues at work and carry out my union duties.

“it isn’t until people get involved that they realise that it’s because of us that people have bank holidays, time off, pay rises, etc”

Why do you like your role? I love helping people, making a positive change and making sure my members are aware of what should be followed and how things should be done, in line with BT policy and procedure. I really enjoy it when I get a problem that can’t be resolved locally. It comes into my hands and by problem-solving I get the right outcome – I love to know I’ve exhausted every single path for an individual and done the best I can for them.

Who has helped you with such a positive experience? My branch secretary at the CWU Birmingham, Black Country and Worcester branch, Vicki Cornelius, has encouraged me every step of the way; she’s my one stop for everything to do with the union and a great mentor.

What about union activity outside the workplace? I attend regional meetings, youth conferences and education events where I can share best practice with other CWU reps, nationally.

How do you think people regard unions? I’ve been working since I was 16. My recent involvement with the CWU has been the biggest eye-opener for me in that there is no school education about the importance of trade unions and what they do. A lot of people who are not part of a union tend to have a really bad perception of unions and it isn’t until they get involved that they realise that it’s because of us that people have bank holidays, time off to be with their children, pay rises, etc.

I see our employment rights slowly dissolving and that is very disappointing; this is why unions are very important. The more union members we have, the more the importance of unions is recognised, the better chance we will have as employees of bigger companies to have as many rights as we can.

“the union helped me secure an extra 30 days of pay”

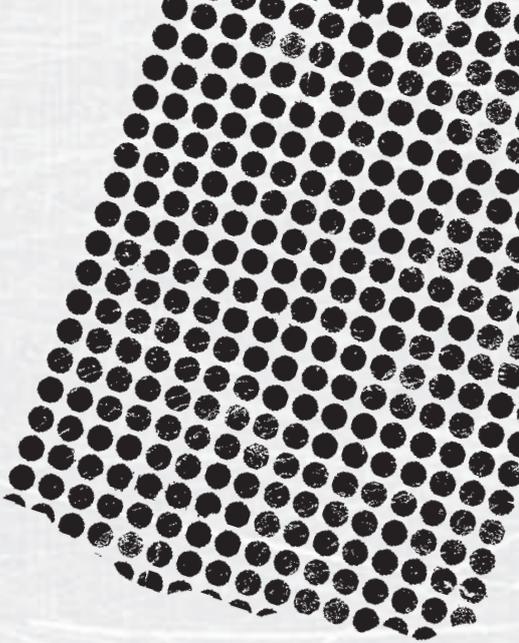
What are your hopes in your union work? In the branch I want to do everything I can to educate young members. It’s about engagement and keeping people involved, which doesn’t happen as much as I feel it should for young workers and that’s something I want to change.

I want to make sure as a young rep that the focus is not taken away from the need to make a positive difference, not just for me and the people I work with today but also for my kids and the future generation as well.

My Social Media

I use Facebook and Twitter personally to keep up to date with the trade union movement.





Fern McCaffrey

GMB

"I was a trade union brat! My father was a lay member activist and ever since I can remember I was trotted round union events and things like that. Most teenagers stop doing it for a while but I started my social science degree and realised the importance of unions and began to get more active, going to events, branch meetings, reading up on lots of literature..."

"I've worked for an online retailer in the private sector in Richmond, London for 18 months. I went straight from uni as a temp and didn't leave – now I'm part of the furniture. Most people get involved in the union through work but I've gone a different route. My workplace is not unionised, it's a young company and we are not quite at that level yet...."

"I'm chair of the TUC Young Workers Forum and my job is to facilitate the relationship between the Forum and the General Council."

"A lot of young members have come forward in the last two years and are starting to get a voice on the General Council. The TUC has a programme of work specially targeting young members and there are great opportunities for us to get ourselves out there and get momentum behind young members' issues."

"The issues list is endless! Among the biggest are access to work, training, apprenticeships, unpaid internship and the housing market..."

"At the moment the Forum is concentrating on access to worthwhile and meaningful apprenticeships, and young workers having no access to the housing market. There is a generation missing out on things our parents had the opportunity to experience a lot more easily than we will."

Pictures: Jess Hurd/reportedigital.co.uk



"I also sit on the TUC's race relations and women's committees – they are amazing. It's a complete eye opener to see the work of other equality structures and it's helped to shape the forum. It's a slow struggle because youth structures are not as ingrained as in other committees but it's great to see how they operate and the way they get people active.

"This generation didn't grow up when trade unions were popular. Children in the 90s don't have massive experience of unions at home or in the public sphere so we are really trying to get them to engage in that and realise unions are not just there when there is a problem but at every point in your life. We need to show unions are on your side and great to be part of. And that we're not all stereotypical white 40-year-old men but come in all shapes and sizes!

My Social Media



"Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram are great ways to get your voice out there and it's free. It only takes five of you to retweet a message and you can get to a thousand people. Once you start following people you see there is a whole range of activists out there who are mobile and willing to go and get involved in campaigns and do the on-the-ground stuff that makes campaigns and activism real and successful.

"There has never been media like this, especially for people like us who don't have the money to spend on campaigns."

Follow us at

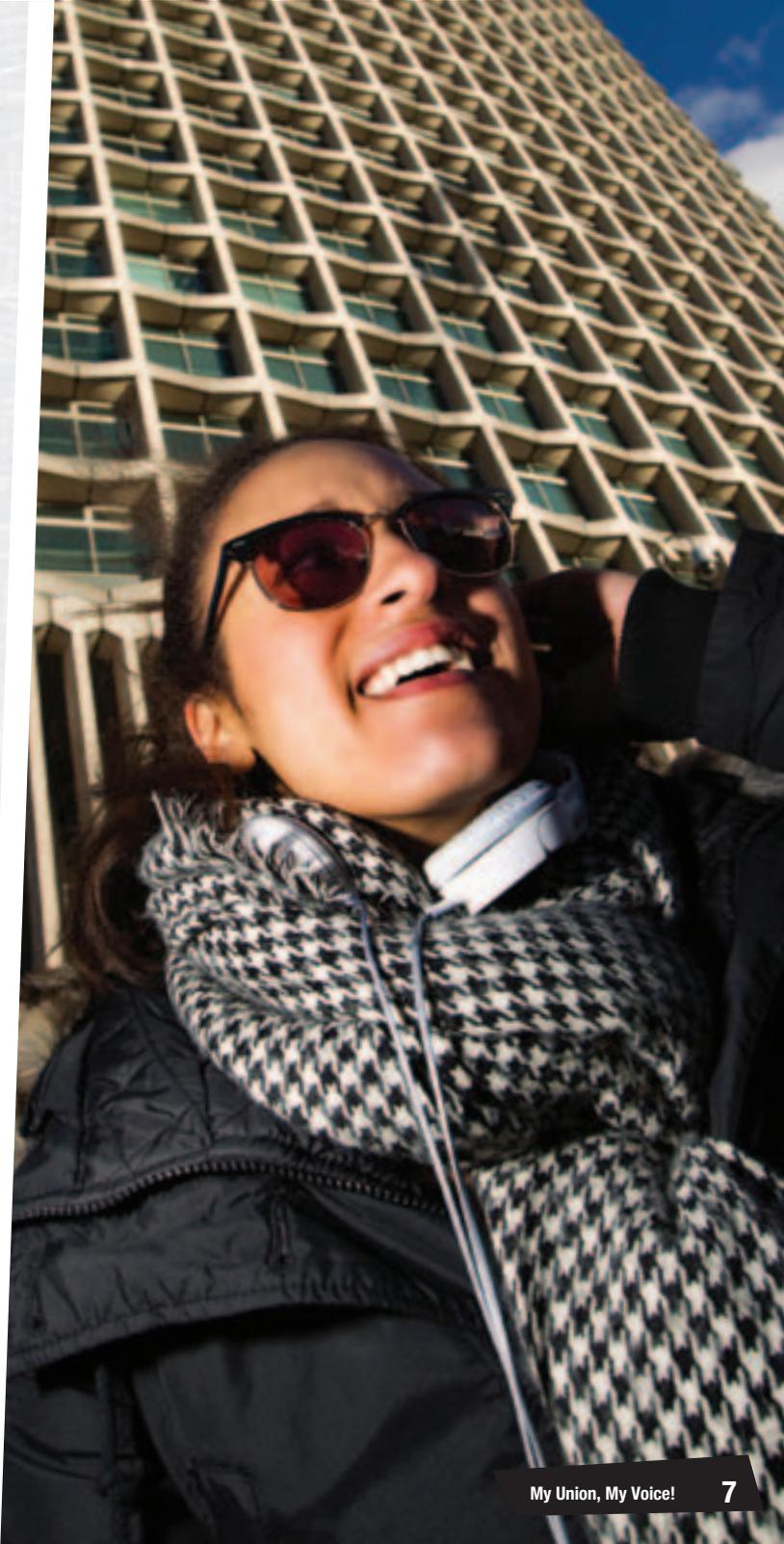
twitter.com/GMBYoungMembers

twitter.com/TUCYoungWorkers

twitter.com/fernmccaffrey



"There is a generation missing out on things our parents had the opportunity to experience a lot more easily than we will"





Unite

Jamie

Max-Caldwell

Jamie Max-Caldwell uses any medium he can to get across how valuable unions are.

Last year he was awarded a TUC Congress Award for Youth for producing an animation that explains clearly and simply what a union is and does.

It took Jamie 10 hours a day for seven days to create the video, which packs a huge amount of history, theory and organising into six minutes.

Originally designed to be used by the Unions Into Schools project as a classroom tool to kick-start conversations with pupils about the enduring relevance of the labour movement, the video has now attracted thousands of YouTube viewers from all over the world.

Jamie, who is 25 and a shop steward at Eclipse Blinds in Glasgow, joined Unite as soon as he could – being a union member was in his blood after years of seeing his shop steward Dad stand up for workers.

“I saw Dad going on courses and how his union helped stop his workplace from shutting down. It’s a family thing to be part of a union. We have the ethos that if you want to change things and do things then you should get involved and not be scared.”

When the chance to become a shop steward came up Jamie jumped at it. “I was really interested because I knew what unions could do and I wanted to be in the forefront.”

No mean feat for a youngster and Jamie admits he had his work cut out being a shop steward at such a tender age. “But it was good in a sense because I had to prove myself and that helped spur me on and the more I got involved the more I was inspired to do more.”

Since he’s been a shop steward, workplace membership has increased and as well as attending a variety of TUC Education courses, Jamie is working hard to introduce union learning to his colleagues.

He is chair of the Unite Scotland Youth Committee, which has been reinvigorated and has a large and active group campaigning around issues such as the bedroom tax, tuition fees and equalities, with many of its members also sitting on the union's various equality committees.

It took Jamie
10 hours a day
for seven days to
create the video

"Unions could have easily slipped into trying to make it hip for young people but that's not necessary. There just needs to be something about how unions can help. Right now there are more problems than ever, with young people facing zero-hours, being exploited and all the other equality issues."

Jamie is also vice-chair of the STUC Youth Committee, which is working on creating a generic version of his animation for other unions to use.

"I want young people to be more active," he says, arguing that he went through school knowing about unions because of his Dad but was never educated about them at school. "That was very much missing and most of my friends don't know what a union does. We should be getting into schools and informing young people what they are and then they can make their own choices."

Jamie's now working on a podcast for young Unite members, offering them a platform where they can talk about issues affecting them. It will include songs about social justice by young artists. He hopes the first podcast will be available on the Unite Scotland website soon.

Whatever his medium you can be sure Jamie's message will continue. "It's all about taking that first step and joining a union. From there it all fits into place: you'll find yourself building knowledge, your confidence will go up – get involved, get in contact with the union – it all starts with yourself."



My Social Media



Jamie's video is on
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNbOVYyfar&feature=youtu.be

He is on Twitter at twitter.com/mightyjambug

He uses Facebook to keep linked in with the youth movement all over the UK and finds that it and Twitter are the best ways to keep right up with campaigns.

He also uses the TUC's online resource at www.unionreps.org.uk to help with his role if he's unsure about something. The response is always fast.



Prospect

Debbie Wilson



You won a TUC Congress Award for Youth in 2013 for your work at Sellafield, Cumbria.

What did you do? I helped build Prospect's Sellafield Branch Young Professionals Network – known as YPN – into a nearly 100-strong forum after starting with just seven members in 2012.

When did you start work at Sellafield and what do you do? I started work as an environmental adviser four years ago – I've just started a new job as a waste adviser.

"I helped build a nearly **100-strong** forum after starting with just seven members in **2012**"

“We do have an aging workforce so it is very important to get young people involved – they are the future”

How did you get active with Prospect? My branch secretary asked for help setting up the YPN and I went along and volunteered as secretary. We hold regular meetings for young employees where it's good to bounce ideas off each other. We organise recruitment drives and talks on issues such as pensions and the Performance Management Agreement (PMA). Last year we organised our first annual conference with speakers on the theme of leadership.

Do you enjoy the role? Yes, so much that I decided to become a workplace rep for the union, which means I can play a leading role in helping to improve learning and careers advice for members. We do have an aging workforce so it is very important to get young people involved – they are the future. In the next 10–20 years people will be retiring and we need young people to train up and get involved so that there is someone to take over when they leave.

Have your obvious organising skills helped you build other links? We have links with members from a number of other Prospect branches, including fuel-manufacturing site Springfields, BT and energy company E.On. This year I will be attending my first Prospect national conference in May and have been asked to get involved in a breakout session, sharing knowledge to help five or six other branches set up their own YPN.

And are you involved in other activities? I'm part of the TUC's Young Workers' Forum and will be attending the Young Workers' Conference in March.

What does your union mean to you? Until I started at Sellafield I'd never really heard of a union, now it's an important part of my life. I love the union because it is the place where the entire workforce can have their say.”



“Until I started at Sellafield I'd never really heard of a union, now it's an important part of my life”

My Social Media

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www.prospect.org.uk/campaigns_and_events/national_campaigns/youngrepchallenge/index?_ts=1



Fire Brigades' Union

David Pitt

Firefighter David Pitt junior is following in his Dad's footsteps working to improve life for others.

When he joined the Fire Brigade in 2009, David was encouraged to join the FBU and having seen Dad, David senior, work hard as a union rep at his fire station in the West Midlands, wanted to know more about what being a union member involved.

“What I found is that unless someone is doing the branch rep role nothing gets done”

But he discovered his station was not active and staff used their membership simply as an insurance policy if they were in trouble.

David and a colleague decided to find out more and hopped on a train to attend rallies in London, where they met up with other firefighters campaigning against cuts.

“We got to meet other firefighters from around the country having the same problems with cuts to their service and when we came away we were keen to be part of the union and to try and make a difference.”

With no union rep at his station in West Bromwich David decided to take on the role and says things have taken off from there.



“It was tough, but now we are up to a point where everyone is confident with me. Now it’s a unionised station”

“What I found is that unless someone is doing the branch rep role nothing gets done on a station union-wise – no one knows about campaigns or what’s happening – you don’t have information if you don’t have a rep.”

In his rep role David has represented colleagues at grievance and disciplinary hearings. “We’ve saved some jobs where otherwise people would not have been represented.”

He says taking on the role was tough at first.

“There have been some people working here for 20–30 years who have not felt brave enough to fill the role and there was me who had done less than a year and wanted to be a rep – so it was tough, but now we are up to a point where everyone is confident with me. Now it’s a unionised station.”

David has also become an area rep, which involves representing six stations on behalf of the union.

As the sole FBU rep to the TUC Young Workers’ Forum he’d like to see more young people being recruited by the Fire Brigade and getting involved.



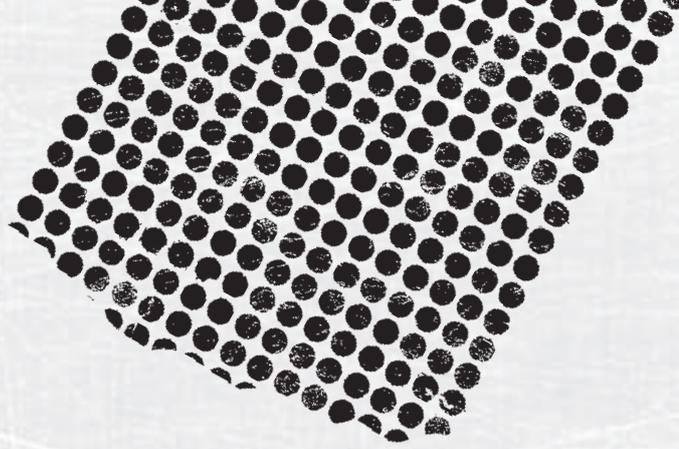
“It seems to me that there are a lot of young unemployed people and when they do find a job they are scared to join the union or be seen to be outspoken. I’d like to eradicate that and give them the confidence to join and change the workplace and make it more of a positive place for young people.”

David’s personal goal is also to see more union reps at fire stations. “I see it as my job to encourage people in different stations to do that.”

My Social Media

I use Twitter for trade union information/news and general keeping in touch with trades unionists from different parts of the country. I also update my Twitter account with pictures of picket lines and national FBU/TUC marches. Contact David on @davidpitt88





Justine Leigh didn't wait too long before throwing herself into union work after starting at the Ministry of Justice – just a month!

At 19 she went along to her first PCS MoJ branch AGM in Manchester.

She says she always knew she'd join the union and get involved after witnessing the hard work done by her mum, Stella, who also works for the MoJ.

"Mum has always been involved and I've always taken an interest in what she does and understood the reasons behind the union concept and why people get up at six to go on a picket line!" she says.

Justine went along to see what the AGM was like and heard PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka speak. "It was amazing. He really, really inspired me and helped me understand stuff."

As a result Justine put herself forward for her branch executive committee – the youngest ever member – and has been busy working for her union ever since. "I wanted to see the difference it can make to people and the help we provide. I wanted to be in that kind of helping people role."

Now, at just 21, Justine is a health and safety rep at her workplace and hopes to represent members in disciplinary and grievance proceedings in the near future. She also active in the union's young members' network as well as vice-chair of the Greater Manchester PCS MoJ Branch.

Public and Commercial
Services Union

Justine
Leigh

Pictures: Paul Herrmann

“Justine put herself forward for her branch executive committee – the youngest ever member”

Last year she spoke at her first MoJ group conference. “There were about 200 people and I stood up and made a speech. I was absolutely nervous and it was a big step for me because I’m not a public speaker but seeing my colleagues in the front row got me through. It was dead good and meeting other people was amazing as well as spending time with people who care as much as you do. I just came back and thought ‘O my God, I love it!’”

Now Justine has her sights set on speaking at national conference next year – to 1,000 people.

“I think people respect me at work and I am trying to get more young people involved,” she says. And having recently encouraged a teenage colleague to get on board, Justine is delighted that she’s now looked up to as role model.

“We need more young people. After all, we are the ones who are going to be still here in years to come.”

“I love the recognition when you do something good and when someone says thank you – it’s nice to be appreciated.”

With so much experience already under her belt it’s hardly surprising that Justine would like to be a full-time union officer one day.

In the meantime getting the message about unions across is a passion that takes up lots of her time. “If you are in a union you feel the benefit and if you are not you are oblivious. The union has been there for me and it’s not just an insurance policy.”



“There were about
200
people and I stood up
and made a speech”

My Social Media

Greater Manchester MoJ has a Facebook page and Twitter. It also has a branch magazine that is sent to all our members via email.

Follow them on Twitter @PCSMOJGM



Denis

Patel

UNISON

EVERYONE
DESERVES
A DECENT
PENSION

UNISON
the public service union

I'm voting
 YES
to protect
my pension

UNISON
the public service union

Denis Patel was just 16 when he joined UNISON after starting work with West Midlands police in its IT and Projects Department in Birmingham.

“My father was a branch secretary for the RMT union so I knew from my parents what a union is about and what it does for people who work,” he explains.

Denis was keen to get involved in working for better terms and conditions, health and safety and equality issues as well as in the broader issue of public service cuts.

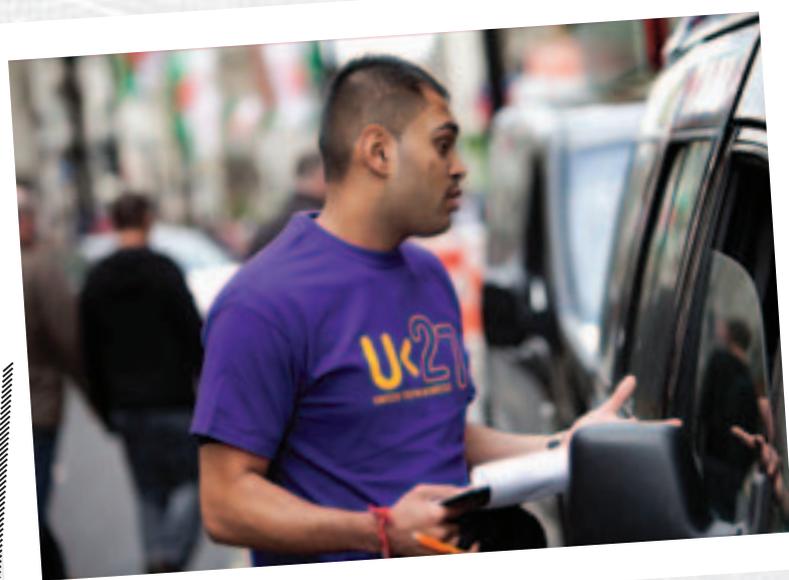
Now at just 23 he’s active in his workplace and has risen through the union ranks, becoming vice-chair of the West Midlands region young members’ network as well as of the union’s national young members’ forum. This year UNISON has had a 50 per cent increase in young workers joining up.

“We have been involved in lots of stuff and helped make changes,” he says. This has included running successful campaigns to challenge privatisation in public services, taking the message to a wider audience via the TUC, the British Youth Council as well as the UNISON national conference.

The forum has campaigned heavily round pensions, lobbying MPs to answer critical questions affecting young people. It has also supported apprentices by working for improvements to terms and conditions and other issues that affect them.

“You can see the benefit the union brings and being involved means you can help change people’s conditions. It makes things a bit safer for people at work and makes them feel that extra care is given to them,” he says.

For anyone who believes there is little relevance for young people in unions today, he says: “Look at your workplace and from there you can see you can make a difference. Start in small areas to give yourself a better working environment, whether it’s to do with health and safety, better pay, terms and condition or equality issues.”



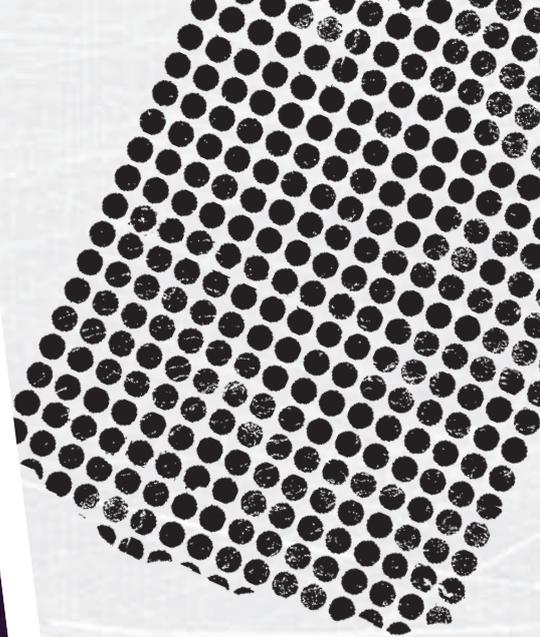
“My father was a branch secretary for the RMT union so I knew from my parents what a union is about and what it does for people who work”

Denis has also now branched out into wider activity in the youth wing of the Labour Party. “There is loads more to be involved in, especially in the police and justice area,” he says. His work includes campaigning for the vote at 16; for scrapping the 16–25 student railcard annual renewal fee; and for half off fares for young people rather than the current third off. “Fares are going up and, for young people trying to afford travel to work, this is a big issue, particularly in the Greater London area – it has an impact on young people trying to get employment,” he explains.

My Social Media

UNISON has a young members Twitter account @YoungUNISON and a Facebook page Young Members in UNISON.





Nicola Hawkins

Nicola, how did you learn about the union? It was after starting work in Mamma Mia in the West End where I was playing Sophie's best friend, Ali, as well as covering for the lead part.

Is that the first you'd heard about Equity? No, I first heard about Equity while studying musical theatre at ArtsEd college in London. But it didn't seem that relevant at the time.

So what prompted you to find out more? I had to sign the West End Agreement contract. I am quite proactive and so I wanted to know what I'd signed up to with the agreement.

Did that lead to more involvement? Yes, my dep (the name for an Equity rep) on the show had difficulty attending West End Agreement meetings and suggested I go along in his place. So I went on my own and I really enjoyed them – there was a bit of gossip and tea and biscuits but it was also a group of people who really wanted to

Equity

get things done and improve conditions for performers. I was very lucky. As a graduate I was very aware I had the best job I was ever likely to have. But this is not an industry in which you can easily say you have made it – you have to keep pushing and working really hard.

What happened then? I became the Equity dep on the show and started to get more involved. I started giving tailored talks to different groups of students in colleges, along with an official from Equity, about the importance of being part of the union. I talk about making the union relevant to what students understand and teaching people that we are stronger together, especially in an industry with a high turnover of young people who are very easily taken advantage of. If you don't want to do something, someone else will do it – for cheaper.

“Too many young people are ‘working’ for less than the minimum wage or not being paid at all”



What else do you do for the union? I’m now on the union’s Young Members’ Committee. This year its annual open meeting will be held in Manchester. Last year Sir Ian McKellen addressed the event and we’re hoping for another high-profile speaker in 2014. Manchester has a large theatre student population and we want to let them know they do have a voice and the YMC is there for them and that we need their feedback so that we know what’s going on in the industry.

What are particular concerns for young people in the industry? ‘Low Pay, No Pay’ policy in profit-sharing productions is a particular concern because too many young people are ‘working’ for less than the minimum wage or not being paid at all. Some are doing dual roles and not being paid extra. I’m an actor-musician and play a range of instruments. It’s a part of the industry that’s rapidly growing because producers are realising it’s cheaper to hire actor-musicians than a band and actors as well. But we’re not paid any more than the actor rate.

What does the union mean for you? Without the union we would be in such a vulnerable position. We are stronger together and it is so important, in an industry where we are easily replaceable, that we can stick together and not be singled out. With a union you can go to your dep, then you’re not one person standing up causing a fuss but you have a collective voice.

Nicola has been seen in:

- Dick Whittington in Ipswich
- Chicago in Oldham
- Cinderella in Leeds
- Sleeping Beauty in Mold
- Temping jobs when she’s between productions.

“we are stronger together, especially in an industry with a high turnover of young people who are very easily taken advantage of”

My Social Media

Equity has a good website. In the members’ areas actors can keep up to date with latest agreements and news on campaigns.

The Young Members’ committee uses a lot of social media – Twitter and Facebook mainly – and ran a competition in March on Twitter with lots of great prizes. Follow me and the union on Twitter:

@nicola_hawkins
@EquityYMC



"This set of case studies,
published to mark the first ever
TUC Young Workers' Month,
tells the stories of young
trade unionists who,
as well as joining a union,
joined in too".



Frances O'Grady

Published by:
TUC
Congress House
Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3LS
March 2014

Design: www.design-mill.co.uk
Print: College Hill Press

