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LEARNINGREP

unionlearn.org.uk | Autumn 2019

Celebrating 20 years of the Union Learning Fund

- ▶ *Learning at Work Week*
- ▶ *Helping civil servants*
- ▶ *New unionlearn publications*
- ▶ *Union learning makes a difference*
- ▶ *Tommy gets royal recognition*

unionlearn
from the TUC




SALUTING WORTHY WINNERS

ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR ANNUAL conference is always the part when we recognise some of our union learning reps for promoting learning opportunities in English, maths, digital skills and supporting three important (but often overlooked) groups – disadvantaged workers, older workers and apprentices.

Like all the conference participants, I always enjoy the short films we make to introduce each of the winners, who this year were Jayne Barry and Jane Yugire from UNISON, Sean Dixon and Michelle Whitley from Usdaw, Rachel Vine from BFAWU and Claire Thorpe from PCS.

“Like all the conference participants, I always enjoy the short films we make to introduce each of the winners.”

Watching this year’s films reminded me of the first time I heard about Jane, back when I was Regional Secretary of the Northern TUC. It was my very good friend Kenny Bell, who was secretary of UNISON’s Newcastle City Branch for 10 years until his death in 2011, who put Jane on my radar. “I’ve got this young rep coming in and she’s going to be brilliant,” he told me. And he was right.

Of course, all our winners are brilliant – in fact, every learning rep has done amazing things, thanks to the backing of their unions and unionlearn. We know both new and experienced ULRs need support, which is why we are running our popular Supporting Learners programme again this autumn. Make sure you book your free place at your regional event today! 

Kevin Rowan is Director of unionlearn



Department
for Education

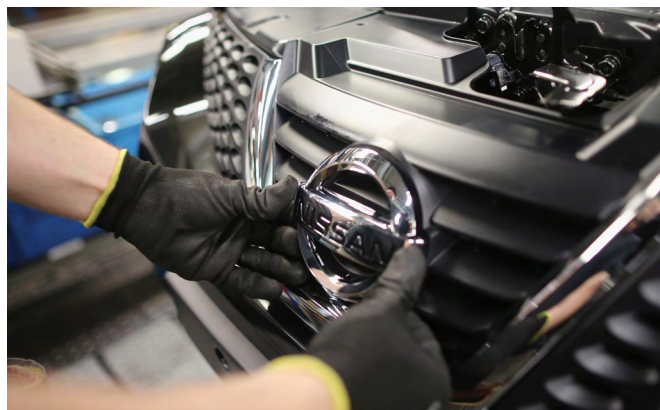
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NEWS + VIEWS

Unite signs breakthrough agreement with Nissan



Unite’s North-East, Yorkshire & Humberside region launched its new learning agreement at Nissan with a series of six events across the car manufacturer’s Sunderland plant during Learning at Work Week (LaWW) in May.

The agreement, which covers 7,500 workers, represents the first time the company has worked in partnership with Unite on the learning agenda.

“We have an extremely strong Unite branch on site and once the convenor and deputy convenor got involved, they drove it forward, which enabled us to bring our learning on site, something we have been trying to do for many years,” explains Regional Learning Manager Gill Pearson.

Through its series of launches across the site, the union was able to engage almost 500 members of staff, says Unite Learning Organiser Anna Lavery.

“We now have a pilot of 30 learners studying functional skills English and maths with training provider Stream on Demand; we’ve enrolled

members on courses through our online platform LearnWithUnite; and in September we’re going to be launching Keeping Up With The Kids, to help parents help their children with maths homework,” Anna says.

In addition, Anna and the team of three ULRs on site have been helping the functional skills learners by organising revision sessions on site ahead of their exams, as well as planning a second set of promotional events to enrol even more learners in the autumn.

Many employers in Nissan’s massive supply chain are also getting in touch with Anna to find out what Unite could offer them in terms of workplace learning.

New digital jobs and skills service begins rollout

Get Help to Retrain, the government’s new digital jobs and skills service, is set to arrive in Leeds City Region, Cambridge and

Peterborough and the south-west this autumn, after successful launches in Liverpool City Region, the West Midlands and the north-east this summer.

Part of the National Retraining Scheme (NRS), Get Help to Retrain is an online service that aims to help people identify the skills they already have, find training courses to gain the skills they need and explore local job opportunities.

During the initial rollout, adults aged 24 and over, with a qualification below degree level and working below a certain wage threshold are being invited to trial the new service to help develop and evaluate it ahead of its release to all eligible adults in England next year.

With the help of UNISON learning rep Norman Hunter, staff at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) were among the first workers in the country to see Get Help to Retrain in action when they took part in the pilot this summer.

What began with interviews with eight staff, including union reps, grew to more than 25 staff working with the digital service, while Norman has also encouraged all LCRCA staff to take a look at the website and leave feedback.

"All our staff and reps involved have said they enjoyed the experience and many, but not all, see the potential changes to work and digitalisation as an opportunity and not just another threat," Norman says.

Barnsley FC expands learning offer to youth

Ten Yorkshire 16-year-olds have kicked off the current season with a place on Barnsley FC's Shadow

Scholarship programme, now in its second year of operation at the club.

The team's Academy, which oversees the development of the club's youth teams, is already recognised as providing an excellent training and education programme for young players, who leave either with a professional contract or the qualifications to go to university.

The new Shadow Scholarship programme extends the club's learning and development offer to local youngsters by giving them the chance to train every day in a professional environment and study too.

It's aimed at nurturing the talent of late developers including former members of Barnsley's own Academy and academies at other clubs in the area, by giving them a second chance at a career in professional football.

Participants can enrol on a BTEC National Diploma in Sport at Level 1, 2 or 3 or a foundation degree in football coaching that has been specifically written for such programmes by the English Football League (EFL) and the University of South Wales.

They also have access to:

- Barnsley FC's sport and fitness facilities and programmes
- free physiotherapy
- sports psychology and lifestyle one-to-ones
- nutrition and anti-doping workshops and podcasts.

Workout week builds maths muscles

ULRs across the country celebrated everyday maths during unionlearn's Maths Workout Week, which ran from Monday 7 to Friday 11 October this year.

In the run-up to the week, three teams of PCS learning reps were the first to trial unionlearn's new maths-based treasure hunt activity as part of a learning day in Loughborough, using a trail around a park.

"I loved the way we used our maths knowledge in a fun way while learning something about a beautiful area," commented ULR Herma Hughes, who works at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in Birmingham.

Unionlearn also added a new Everyday Finances assessment to the popular SkillCheck online tool, which tests learners' financial know-how by using examples from day-to-day life (eg applying for credit cards, paying for holidays, taking part in a lottery pool).

In addition, several contributors added new maths-related pieces to the unionlearn blog, including a helpful breakdown of three excuses for not improving our maths

skills by Ben Perkins from National Numeracy.

Click [here](#) to find out more about unionlearn's new maths treasure hunt resource

Click [here](#) to try the new everyday finances assessment on SkillCheck

REPTECH

Essential new app

Whether you are thinking of enrolling on an apprenticeship, already on one or supporting colleagues on apprenticeships, unionlearn has a new app and web-based tool to help.

The Apprenticeship Essentials app is available for Apple and Android smartphone users and on the web via the unionlearn website.

The app contains helpful tips for young people entering the world of work, a breakdown of employment rights and training entitlements, an explanation of what unions are and a job search function.

It also includes tools to help you choose the best apprenticeship for you and to rate your apprenticeship, using the swipe left and swipe right gestures familiar to dating app users.

Click [here](#) to find out more





WEST MIDLANDS APPRENTICES SET FOR BETTER DEAL

Apprentices in the West Midlands are set to get a better deal now that the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has signed the TUC's Apprenticeship Charter with unionlearn and Midlands TUC.

Covering pay, job role, health and safety, terms and conditions, training and skills, plus access to trade union support, the Charter assures new starters and existing staff on apprenticeships that they will be able to develop the skills they need throughout their careers.

"I'm delighted to sign the Apprenticeship Charter, on behalf of the WMCA, which underlines our commitment to provide high-quality, meaningful apprenticeships," said Chief Executive Deborah Cadman OBE when she signed the Charter with TUC Regional Secretary Lee Barron in July.

"We have committed to pay our apprentices above the minimum apprenticeship wage; to use apprenticeships wherever possible to upskill our staff; and to hire apprentices to complement our workforce, rather than supplement it – signing the Apprenticeships Charter furthers that commitment."

Unionlearn Apprenticeships Officer Mark Rowe said the Charter was a key component of unionlearn's strategy for upskilling and reskilling the workforce. "Signing the Charter strengthens the already-excellent partnership we have with the WMCA, which was established when working together on the National Retraining Scheme Career Learning Pilot," Mark said. **LR**

Supporting Learners is back this autumn



Union learning reps (ULRs) are sharing experiences and ideas and finding out more about new tools and resources during unionlearn's ever-popular programme of Supporting Learners events across the country this autumn.

ULRs are also learning how to get the most out of new resources such as the new Apprenticeship Essentials app, Value My Skills online and the Careerzone; discussing hot topics including wellbeing, apprenticeships, digital and functional skills; and getting updates on workplace learning and TUC work in their region.

"Unionlearn's annual Regional Supporting Learners events are very popular among union learning reps and provide the ideal opportunity to find out about the latest resources, news and campaigns as well as catch up with colleagues from workplaces across the region," says unionlearn Director Kevin Rowan.

"This year, unionlearn is launching its new Apprenticeship Essentials app and the Careerzone online resource as well as celebrating 20 years of the Union Learning Fund – so I'd encourage people to book early and get along to their nearest event."

The programme kicked off with a packed event in London, where TUC Regional Secretary Sam Gurney said he met "loads of amazing union learning reps". Leicester and Manchester also hosted successful events.

The three remaining events are:

- Tuesday 12 November: Sheffield, Showroom Workstation
- Tuesday 19 November: Newcastle, Centre for Life
- Wednesday 20 November: Exeter, Mercure Rougemont

[Click here](#) to book your place on your regional Supporting Learners event

BFAWU starts functional skills course at banana warehouse

Food workers' union BFAWU has run its first functional skills course for workers at the Coventry warehouse of fruit importing company Fyffes, whose name is to be found on bunches of bananas in most of the major supermarkets in the UK.

BFAWU Project Worker Karen Plasom and Region 3 Full-Time Officer Lukasz Bemka met Fyffes manager Mike Cartledge back in the spring to discuss how they could work together to bring learning on to the site.

"We had a meeting with Mike and explained what we could do and the steps we could take to achieve the aims of setting up the courses," Karen says.



“There is a large European workforce on site and Mike wanted to upskill his staff, giving them an opportunity to improve their English skills by bringing classes on site within work hours.”

More than 60 staff registered their interest in improving their English and maths at a series of learning promotion days Karen and Lukasz ran on site, and the union duo went on to conduct initial assessments to establish what level everyone was working at.

BFAWU then brought Chesterfield College Workskills Manager Lee Kirton on board. And the union, college and the company then agreed to run the first course with the learners who needed help most urgently.

Tutor Sally Lowndes started the course in May, incorporating signage she had seen around the factory on a site visit organised by the company.

Usdaw learning reps run mental health campaign

When they ran an awareness-raising campaign at the Castlewood Distribution Centre site in Derbyshire earlier this year, Usdaw learning reps discovered that more than 75 per cent of their co-workers had either experienced poor mental health themselves or knew someone who had.

It was the popularity of the mental health awareness course on site that prompted the ULR team to run one of the union’s It’s Time To Talk campaigns on site.

Supported by Usdaw’s equality department, the campaign is designed to show people that they can tackle their mental health issues by talking about them. The union has produced a campaign pack to help sites get started that includes everything from tea, coffee and biscuit packs to informative literature around mental health.

“We ran the campaign in the canteen with reps released for the day,” says Project Worker Neil Chapman. “People could have a chat about the issue and we asked them to fill in a short survey. We also promoted a range of distance learning courses around mental health which we run through the learning centre.”

Of the 125 people who completed the survey, 98 (78 per cent) said they either knew someone who had experienced poor mental health or had done so themselves. “It really opened our eyes and made us realise that it was a real issue for many people,” Neil says.

The surveys also collected information on whether people knew where to go for help; what they expected of their employer and their union; and whether they had supported a colleague who has experienced a mental health issue.

“The campaign engaged on a different level with colleagues and we are planning to do more events like this,” Neil says.

“We are also exploring how we can better support staff and make sure they know where to go if they have an issue.”

UNISON helps council staff to tackle aggression



More than 50 Blackpool Council staff feel more secure at work now that they have learned the skills they need to manage aggressive behaviour by service users, thanks to five half-day workshops run by UNISON’s regional learning and organising team.

After a couple of incidents in the municipal offices earlier this year, Blackpool LG Branch stepped in to review health and safety procedures with the employer. The branch also looked at what could be done to improve members’ safety at work.

The regional learning and organising team was then able to negotiate co-funded workshops with the employer, which looked at managing aggression and showed participants how they could act to de-escalate situations.

“The five one-day workshops showcased what UNISON can provide for members on the back of its strength and influence in the workplace,” says North West Learning and Development Organiser Lyndsey Marchant.

“The feedback said staff now felt more secure knowing what to do if there were any problems with aggression.”

FE colleges need more investment, says TUC

The government must properly invest in adult learning, urged TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady on the publication of the Augar Review into post-18 education and funding this summer.

“Everyone should have access to quality education and training, whatever stage of life they are at, but our further education (FE) sector has been cut to the bone by years of devastating cuts,” Frances said.

“The government must repair the damage austerity has caused and properly invest in adult learning: as the world of work changes, working people will need to keep gaining new skills throughout their career.”

Frances supported the review’s recommendation for the return of maintenance grants for students from low-income families and increased support for FE colleges, which have been hit by a 25 per cent cut in student financing in the past nine years.

The review also recommended introduction of a ‘lifelong learning loan allowance’ to help people study and reskill later in life, which could be used for full and part-time learning at higher technical and degree level.



[Click here](#) to download the report



Facing the future through fun

ULRs up and down the country helped their co-workers enjoy a wide range of opportunities during Learning at Work Week in May.

✪ Keith Hatch

Shaping the Future, this year's theme for Learning at Work Week (LaWW), provided the ideal opportunity for unions to promote learning in their workplaces, raise the profile of union-supported learning and engage with employers and colleagues to discuss training needs.

Organised by the Campaign for Learning (CfL) and a core entry in the ULR diary for years now, LaWW once again prompted unions and union reps to hold hundreds of taster sessions, run introductory courses and organise stalls and activities in workplaces across the country.

"Learning at Work Week is the perfect chance for union learning reps to engage with colleagues and employers and run something in their workplace," commented unionlearn Service Team Manager Ian Borkett.

"Unions have been engaging with LaWW for many years and every year

the numbers involved get bigger as ULRs run activities and sessions ranging from arts and crafts to languages and maths. This is an ideal opportunity to make learning fun and perfect for reigniting workers' interest in learning."

LaWW also represented a great chance to showcase the benefits of union-supported learning and many workplaces encouraged councillors and MPs to pop along and join in the activities.

In Sheffield, Unite's Olive Grove Learning Centre hosted visits by the Mayor of Sheffield, Councillor Tony Downing and Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough MP Gill Furniss, while Doncaster Central MP Dame Rosie Winterton (pictured above) visited First Bus's St Leger depot, where Unite and the company were signing the Period Dignity pledge.

Next year, LaWW runs from Monday 18 to Sunday 24 May.



LTH unions launch learning agreement

The unions at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust launched a major new learning agreement with management during LaWW.

Negotiated by Unite Learning Organiser Phil Boyes and staff side chair Wilson Tweed, the agreement

involves all 12 unions that organise on site, with the lead ULR being GMB member Margaret McParland.

“Once we explained to the training department that we were there to enhance what they do and work in partnership with them, they were really enthusiastic about us getting more people involved in learning with the Trust,” Phil says.

“One of the key priorities will be supporting the estates and facilities staff: a lot of the appraisals are done online but the estates and facilities are still done face-to-face. Our target is to bridge that gap to give everybody the skills so they can complete their own appraisals online so that it levels the playing field a little bit.”



Fun on the buses is just the ticket

Unite learning rep Tony Dyliche organised a packed LaWW at First Bus Potteries at Hanley in Stoke-on-Trent.

The activities ranged from priority areas such as mental health awareness and functional skills tasters to themed days to inspire workers to try something new including music, dog training and photography.

Thursday's virtual reality (VR) day of activities proved particularly popular, with participants taking the chance to experience take-off and landing on a jump jet, sitting in a space station and even fighting robots – as well as improving their IT skills.

“We have a smallish depot of around 300 people with some working at outstations but over 50 people actively took part using the VR with far more than that asking questions and generally showing a positive attitude – a good result in my view,” Tony said.



Walking the walk at TUC HQ

With both LaWW and Mental Health Awareness Week taking place at the same time, the TUC's ULRs and Mental Health First Aiders joined forces to offer staff at Congress House a packed programme of lunchtime and evening activities.

The week began and ended with lunchtime guided walks by Bee Midtown – the first exploring local sites linked to the struggle for votes for women, the second looking at Holborn's football connections.

Staff also visited nearby exhibitions, took a trip to the TUC Library Collections and toured the hidden depths of Congress House, as well as taking part in a practical webinar and a lunchtime Pilates session.

The activities proved very popular with staff. “The suffragette walk was a great way to spend a lunch hour: I hadn't realised how much of note had happened on our doorstep!” said TUC Media Officer Elly Gibson. “The guide was excellent and I came away feeling like I had really learned something.”

The successful programme was put together by Estates Manager Helen Bilton, Southern & Eastern unionlearn Education Officer Marie Hughes, Internal and Digital Communications Officer Lianne Warnell and unionlearn Projects Officer Jane Warwick.

“The suffragette walk was a great way to spend a lunch hour: I hadn't realised how much had happened on our doorstep!”



Bringing learning to council staff

By promoting the various learning opportunities available through the union during LaWW, UNISON learning reps at Leicester County Council engaged around 280 members of staff in learning over the course of the five days.

Over the week, the union ran three stalls, a distance learning enrolment and information session with Leicestershire College, a National Numeracy Day drop-in session and an information stall at Bosworth Battlefield.

“The stalls always attract a lot of people, and distance learning has been popular in the past and I am familiar with the process, while the stall at Bosworth was the best way for our ULR there to share information,” explained Branch Lifelong Learning Coordinator Katharine Friedmann.

“We also wanted to celebrate National Numeracy Day – I am personally very keen to encourage people to improve their numeracy skills.”

Branch staff helped out during the week and Katherine identified useful resources. They also had support from the council, where managers allowed Katherine to work flexibly during the week and provided rooms and spaces to use.

Across the East Midlands, UNISON learning reps organised around 80 events during LaWW. They promoted Reading Ahead in Chesterfield; offered free complementary therapy courses in Derby; and put together a counselling skills course in Lincolnshire. **LR**

Helping civil servants move on at work

PCS's ULF project enables civil servants and other public sector staff to access a wide range of learning opportunities, whether they are new starters on an apprenticeship or older people keen to develop their transferable skills.

♦♦ **Martin Moriarty**

Civil servants, other public sector workers and employees on outsourced government contracts are developing the skills to succeed in their working lives through the three-year Union Learning Fund (ULF) project delivered by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

The project is able to support members and potential members wherever they are in their careers, whether they are new entrants enrolled on an apprenticeship programme or older workers looking to review and develop their transferable skills as a result of the one of the many restructuring programmes across the civil service.

In HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC), for example, the massive office closure and regional centre relocation programme is creating a range of skills needs for staff, many of them in their 40s and 50s, says PCS ULF Project Manager Kim Hendry.

"Unionlearn's Mid-Life Development Review and Value My Skills workshops are very popular across HMRC at the moment, when people are coming to a juncture in their careers because their offices are closing," says Kim.

Helping workers become more fluent in digital

skills is also increasingly important, with HMRC keen to encourage 'smarter' working (from home as well as from the office) by issuing staff with Surface Pro tablets – but not always providing the training that would help them use the equipment most effectively.


That was partly why Leeds ULR Claire Thorpe stepped in to source suitable IT courses to help her co-workers get the most out of the new tablets – for which she won unionlearn's ULR award for digital skills at this year's annual conference.

The project also supports English and maths learning, Kim says. "We offer a range of English, maths and digital courses and most regions have run Level 2 functional skills courses over the year and a half I have been managing the project," she says. These courses take place in both PCS regional offices and individual workplaces.

One of the many organising benefits of learning is that courses often engage members who do not take part in more traditional PCS activity, Kim points out. "On our courses, we have a really good turnout from black workers, women workers, older workers and

"Unionlearn's Mid-Life Development Review and Value My Skills workshops are very popular across HMRC."





“We’re interested in the whole worker, in all the different skills and knowledge and talent and creativity they’ve got, which they may not be able to deploy in the particular job they’re doing.”

disabled workers, so we are meeting a need for members who are facing discrimination in work and in wider society,” Kim says.

With departmental restructuring, job cuts, the lack of recruitment and the public sector pay freeze all contributing to excessive workloads and stress in many PCS workplaces in recent years, the ULF project has delivered a range of health and wellbeing workshops to help staff deal with the challenges.

As apprentice recruitment increases throughout the civil service and across government agencies, PCS is keen to ensure that apprentices get the support they need to pass their end-point assessments and are given the minimum 20 per cent off-the-job training they are entitled to.

However, the ULF project can only support apprentices that the union knows about, which remains a sticking point with most departments, despite the provisions of the Agreed Principles on civil service apprenticeships signed by PCS and the other unions in the National Trade Union Committee (NTUC) and the Cabinet Office in January 2017.

“We have the ridiculous situation where the Department for Education (DfE) funds us to support apprentices but their colleagues in other departments refuse to divulge details about the location of their apprentices to PCS negotiators and local ULRs,” Kim says.

“We continue to press at Cabinet Office and departmental level for this crucial information. In the meantime, we still support apprentices because we don’t rely on the employer to find them – and where we do support them, there’s a lot of good work going on.”

Apprentice recruitment into PCS is the best guarantee of high-quality training, Kim says. “Recruiting, organising and representing apprentices and their issues at workplace level, departmental level and Cabinet Office national level are really important,” she says.

One of the key components of the PCS approach to learning is that the union is interested in helping members develop more than the skills they may need in the workplace at any one time.

“We’re interested in the whole worker, in all the different skills and knowledge and talent and creativity they’ve got, which they may not be able to deploy in the particular job they’re doing,” she says.

And the members feel the same way, as evidenced by the popularity of the creative writing workshops that have recently been delivered in the union’s London and the South East region by Quick Reads author Vaseem Khan (who also spoke at the 2018 unionlearn annual conference).

Kim is keen to build on this work by running creative writing competitions later in the lifetime of the project, holding more workshops to help people develop the skills they would need to take part.


As someone with 16 years’ experience as an industrial officer with PCS before she took on the ULF role 18 months ago, Kim is keen to continue to move learning ever further into the union mainstream. “Learning is a core trade union issue alongside pay, conditions and other key issues,” she says.

Kim is proud of the union’s ULRs, who are at the core of how learning is delivered in the union. “For the past three years, our ULRs have been recognised at unionlearn’s annual conference for exceptional learning achievements in their workplaces,” she points out.

She also pays tribute to the PCS project workers who support and develop the skills and confidence of those ULRs while also building relationships with their colleagues throughout the union.

“We have a brilliant team of regional project workers, who are working increasingly closely with colleagues in PCS regional offices to integrate learning and organising and show all the ways that learning activity can build the union and support PCS members and other staff,” Kim says.

“We are also upskilling our project workers so they can deliver short informal learning sessions, which is giving us a greater range of learning activity as well as making us more self-sufficient.” **LR**



PCS is helping reps and members through learning opportunities like this recent two-day neurodiversity course in Leeds (main photo), delivered by specialist tutor Janine Booth (left).

We can help build a better skills system

After two decades' worth of experience through the Union Learning Fund, unions have first-hand knowledge of what works and what doesn't, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady told this year's unionlearn conference.

◆◆ **Martin Moriarty**

With all their experience over the 20 years of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), unions have accumulated a wealth of good ideas that government could use to overhaul the skills system, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady (pictured, right) told this year's unionlearn annual conference.

"Seven in ten learners tell us they wouldn't have taken part if it wasn't for the support of their union – that means that we know a thing or two about the new skills system that's needed," Frances told the 300 participants gathered in Congress House this July.

Unions were calling for four key practical policy changes, Frances said: "More and better apprenticeships and an end to poverty pay for apprentices. New lifelong learning accounts for all workers and a mid-life skills review. A much stronger right to paid time off to train. And real investment in the National Retraining Scheme so that everybody gets a chance to



develop their talent."

The then Skills Minister Anne Milton said that upskilling was essential with the challenges facing the UK economy in the years ahead.

"There are significant changes impacting our economy – and not just because of Brexit – and these changes are not a blip or short term – there's going to be significant structural change," Anne forecast.

Having the support of trusted organisations like unionlearn was essential to help adults overcome negative experiences of learning in the past.

"Seven in ten learners tell us they wouldn't have taken part if it wasn't for the support of their union."

"I know that many in the workforce are far more likely to listen to a union rep than an employer and certainly more likely to listen to a union rep rather than the government – hence our continuing support for unionlearn to make sure that those people do not miss out," Anne said.

Shadow Skills Minister Gordon Marsden also emphasised the vital role unionlearn and ULF projects had to play supporting people in the changing world of work.

"In the 20 years since the ULF was founded, we have moved from a largely analogue to a largely digital world," Gordon said. "That means the educational system that

“It was like I’d been stuck behind a glass door looking at everybody else being able to do that.”

we have needs also to meet the demands of the changing patterns of work, from the gig economy to the changes brought by automation but also the need for proper work-life balance, rights and entitlements – not to mention the challenges of Brexit, automation and the speeded-up world in which we live.”

Former unionlearn Director Liz Smith said that the continued funding of the ULF was testament to union learning reps in the hall and throughout the country. “Cross-party support for something in the area of learning and skills is almost unheard-of: most of the organisations that were here with us 20 years ago – many good organisations, good people – have gone,” Liz pointed out. “We’ve been able to get the kind of recognition and support we have because of our collectivism, because of our ability to work with employers, which means we’re still here today with a very good future in front of us.”

Young people on apprenticeships need more information if they are to engage with trade unions, said Network Rail apprentice Charlotte Ward in the apprenticeships panel, which also featured contributions from RMT Project Worker John Holmes, Network Rail Head of Apprenticeship Delivery Richard Turner and Poorvi Patel from the Heathrow Skills Taskforce.

“Any lack of engagement is not down to ill-will – a lot more young people are interested in politics than the media would like you to believe – so information is the key,” Charlotte said. “Having our RMT representative come to speak to us is a great example of having more information.”

Quick Reads author Rowan Coleman opened up about the significance of being diagnosed with dyslexia in her 20s. “It meant



Quick Reads author Rowan Coleman (top) signed books for participants, while the then Skills Minister Anne Milton (above) placed on record the government’s continuing support for unionlearn

so much to me to finally know what it was that was stopping me from being able to get the ideas out of my head and to verbalise my thoughts onto the page. It was like I’d been stuck behind a glass door looking at everybody else being able to do that.”

Performance poet Hussain Manawer brought the conference to its feet for a rare standing ovation by speaking about the importance of promoting mental health in the workplace and performing his poem *The White Rose*, written after the unexpected death of his mother.

“Do something in your workplace that is vulnerable and shows you’re human – it’s impossible to be positive all the time,” Hussain said. “As a friend once told me, if your situation has the power to depress you, it also has the power to progress you.” **LR**



ULR AWARDS

Derbyshire UNISON learning rep Jayne Barry won the apprenticeships award for taking the lead in designing and implementing an Apprenticeship Charter at the county council and developing innovative resources to introduce trade unions to young people entering the workforce.

PSC learning rep Claire Thorpe won the digital award for helping co-workers in HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) in Leeds gain the skills they needed to work with new IT equipment that their employers had not provided any training for.

Udaw learning rep Sean Dixon won the award for supporting disadvantaged workers in recognition of the inclusive approach to learning that he has fostered at The Learning Zone in Castleford, from running mental health drop-in sessions for migrant workers to providing resources for learners with dyslexia.

BFAWU learning rep Rachel Vine won the literacy award for helping more than 60 workers at Pennine Foods gain English qualifications.

Udaw learning rep Michelle Whitley won the award for supporting older workers in recognition of all the help she offers to older colleagues at the Sainsbury’s Argos Contact Centre in Widnes, especially around guiding them to undertake the best qualifications to help them progress at work.

Newcastle UNISON learning rep Jane Yugire won her award for supporting maths learning among school staff in particular, where her work has led to the development of a new course to help parents improve their maths and English skills and keep up with their children.

Keeping ahead of the curve

To coincide with this year's annual conference, unionlearn published a new batch of resources to help ULRs and other union reps promote learning at work.

Closing the digital divide

Unionlearn has produced a new booklet to help union learning reps promote and support digital skills and the benefits they bring for colleagues in their work and home lives.

Working to Close the Digital Divide opens with some stark figures that show the urgent need for change: more than 50 per cent of UK employees do not possess the digital skills they need to do their jobs and more than 20 per cent of people don't have the essential digital skills they need for day-to-day life.

The potential costs of failing to close the digital skills gap are enormous, with global consulting firm Accenture estimating that the



UK economy could miss out on £141.5bn of the GDP growth that should be secured by investment in intelligent technologies in the next decade.

The new publication encourages unions and ULRs to negotiate learning agreements with

employers that will help both sides plan to meet the digital skills needs of workers and their enterprises.

It signposts reps to the range of tools and resources to help promote digital skills in the workplace, including the unionlearn Climbing Frame and SkillCheck tool, plus resources from partners such as Digital Unite, FutureLearn and Learn My Way.

It also includes short case studies of union learning projects that are already helping workers acquire and improve their digital skills to offer inspiration to ULRs through tried and tested approaches.

There is a useful glossary of

terms, a list of useful organisations and background documents and a set of skills for life and work that can be used to put together checklists to help learners identify how digitally confident they feel.

[Click here](#) to download your copy

Helping learners kickstart their careers

Career kickstart reviews help young people who have had little careers advice identify their transferable skills, think about potential career pathways and identify the support they need to progress at work.

The model has been developed by unionlearn



and unions in response to the uneven provision of career information, advice and guidance for young people in different parts of the country.

Now unionlearn has developed *Career Kickstart Reviews: A guide for union learning reps*, a practical guide to help union reps deliver career kickstart reviews, whether that's in the workplace or in learning centres, one-to-one or in groups, and to signpost young workers to a range of specialists and experts.

As the booklet points out, ULRs are perfectly suited to conduct career kickstart reviews. "ULRs have the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to effectively provide careers support to young people," it says. "As such, the ULR role underpins all of the other elements of a successful review."

At the heart of the new publication is a clear, accessible guide to the different elements that make up a career kickstart review. There is helpful and detailed advice about how ULRs can conduct an effective review by using their knowledge, skills and ability to make tactical decisions and maintain direction. And there are lots of 'Ten Top Tips' to help ULRs improve as listeners, questioners and summarisers.

The booklet also includes a career kickstart review action plan template, the Power Cards goal achievement resource developed by Greater Manchester-based charity Positive Steps and everything you need for a stress management exercise called 'the stress container'.

[Click here to download your copy](#)

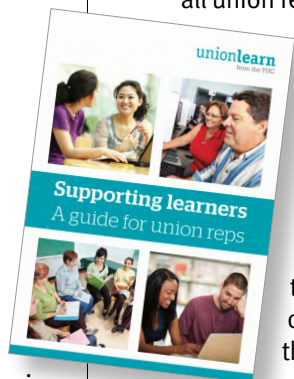
Becoming better ULRs

Both newly elected and well-established union reps who support workplace learning will find lots of helpful advice, useful suggestions and links to reliable sources of information and support in the new

"ULRs have the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to effectively provide careers support to young people. As such, the ULR role underpins all of the other elements of a successful review."

unionlearn publication *Supporting Learners: A guide for union reps*.

The guide is designed to help all union reps provide their



learners with the kind of support that encourages their learning journeys and helps them to develop the skills they need to manage their own progression through the world of work.

It makes the case for supporting learners, from the point of view of benefits for their unions (eg recruitment); for union members (eg improved confidence and ability to deal with change); and for their employers (eg closing their skills gaps and gender pay gaps).

It looks at getting started as a ULR, providing helpful distinctions between terms like 'coaching' and 'mentoring', and sets out the key skills ULRs need to develop, such as active listening, goal setting and action planning.

The guide also includes a useful section looking at professional development for union reps themselves, including a career development pathway that links different roles with relevant qualifications. **LR**

[Click here to download your copy](#)

20 YEARS OF LEARNING

To mark the 20th anniversary of the first round of the Union Learning Fund (ULF), unionlearn has published a new booklet that looks back at some of the key achievements unions have made with the help of this relatively small but extremely effective pot of government funding.



20 Years of Changing the World: How the ULF transforms learners' lives touches on some of the key union-led learning initiatives that shaped the creation of the ULF towards the end of the last century, such as the Return to Learn programme launched by UNISON's predecessor NUPE in 1998, the TUC's own Bargaining for Skills projects in the regions and Steel Partnership Training, launched by what is now Community in the late 1990s.

It examines unions' unrivalled track record in engaging and supporting functional skills learners, rooted in the success of early projects such as Training Opportunities for Skills, Confidence and Achievement (TOSCA), which was run by media and entertainment union BECTU (now part of Prospect) at English National Opera (ENO), and the general union GMB's Căretrain project in care homes.

It also showcases union support for high-quality apprenticeships, using examples such as rail union ASLEF's active role in the development of the new Level 3 train drivers' apprenticeship standard and National Education Union predecessor union ATL's development of an apprenticeship awareness-raising project for teachers.

And it showcases the union capacity for innovation, from football tournaments celebrating diversity and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to the Fire Brigades' Union (FBU) current one-year project, Heat Illness Prevention and Awareness.

[Click here to download your copy](#)



Measuring the impact of the ULF

Independent studies of a group of five individual union ULF projects highlight what a huge difference they are making for learners, the organisations they work for and the economy as a whole.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) Union Learning Fund (ULF) project is helping workers progress in Royal Mail and BT, according to a new impact study by the Marchmont Observatory at the University of Exeter. By delivering the digital skills members need in an era of increasing automation, the project is also equipping them with the tools to deal with rapid change.

The study is one of five produced for unionlearn that examine how the ULF is making a difference for learners, employers and unions. The studies combine interviews with learners, employers, stakeholders and ULF Project Managers with econometric analysis of the skills and qualifications obtained and the benefits for the economy, individuals and employers.

Progression has become much more usual thanks to CWU learning, the study shows. "It's normal now for people to move," ULF Project Manager Paul Dovey is quoted as saying in the impact report.

For example, CWU learner Umar Farooq, who works in the Swindon Royal Mail depot, studied English and IT through the union and is now a shift manager.

Similarly, the learning opportunities promoted at the Heathrow Worldwide Distribution Centre (HWDC) by Lead ULR Parminder Kaur are helping

more women move up the career ladder. One learner progressed from English and maths at Level 2 to a Level 3 management apprenticeship and she is now a deputy manager at HWDC.

With the cost of poor digital skills still evident across the sector, the CWU aims to offer multiple opportunities to engage with IT by making it relevant and non-threatening and creating multiple entry points and pathways to help learners progress as far as they want to go.


"There is an ongoing need for ... IT as we are changing from conventional to new technology and therefore need new IT skills," Umar says. "We have some new machines and are just bringing them in – transitioning – so we train also – and the resource centre is really helpful."

The growth of workplace learning is also helping Royal Mail and BT reduce absenteeism, the report says.

Managers in Royal Mail have linked the provision supported by the ULF to enhanced staff retention and a decline in absenteeism: "Absenteeism and sickness absence is reduced when people get the training – it always reduces as they realise they have the skills to do the work," one manager is quoted as saying. "Previously some staff have lacked the skills or just thought they did, so there could be a lot of sickness absence."



"We have some new machines and are just bringing them in – transitioning – so we train also – and the resource centre is really helpful."



One of the report's key recommendations is to extend the use of apprenticeships in Royal Mail, which has traditionally used apprenticeships far less than CWU's other major employer, BT.

"The relatively limited use of apprenticeships within Royal Mail given the potential within the Levy is puzzling," the report says.

RMT boosts rail apprenticeships

Rail union RMT's project workers and union learning reps (ULRs) are making a huge contribution to the expansion of the apprenticeship programme across the sector. That is made clear by the impact study of the union's 2018/19 ULF project, put together by researchers from the University of Exeter.

"I wouldn't have taken the course without the support from our ULR," one Level 3 learner told the researchers who wrote the study.

Provider TSPLearn also recognised the vital contribution of RMT's learning reps. "ULRs are key," Managing Director James Bishop told researchers.

"When we come here for recruitment days, we can see 20 or 30 people. But without the learning organiser role, they maybe wouldn't engage."

RMT Project Worker Petrit Mihaj also underlined the crucial role played by the union's learning reps.

"Our ULRs' support has been vital to the learning initiative as they continue to tap into the groups in the workplace who have previously been hard to reach," Petrit told researchers.

"The presence of RMT Learning, together with the ULRs, has resulted in a massive uptake of individuals both showing an interest and actually participating in the apprentice programme."

Rail employers have also welcomed the new confidence that RMT learners have brought to their job roles.



"The presence of RMT Learning, together with the ULRs, has resulted in a massive uptake of individuals both showing an interest and actually participating in the apprentice programme."

Bossie Ackerman, a senior manager at National Rail's Sandwell and Dudley depot, has backed the project since being approached by RMT ULR Ian Stokes. Since workplace learning got underway, he has witnessed the change within the learners that have benefitted from the courses.

"They are now knocking on my door for new opportunities and promotion – in many cases we wanted them to step up and take more responsible roles – they are a lot more confident," he told researchers.

How learning pays off for all

The five ULF projects that have had their 2018/19 impacts measured by the University of Exeter between them contributed £188m to the UK economy, according to the independent assessments.

Five ULF projects were involved in the impact studies: financial services union, Aegis, the Communication Workers Union (CWU), general union GMB, the National Association of Racing Staff (NSRS) and rail union RMT.

Learners who have developed a wide range of skills through the five projects will secure higher wages and improved earnings totalling £114m, according to the impact studies.

And the increase in their productivity resulting from their improved skills will benefit their employers to the value of approximately £75m.

The return on investment from the five projects means that every £1 invested in by the ULF is generating a total economic return of at least £7.97 in benefits to both individuals and employers covered by the projects.

Learning supported by the projects has generated more than £53m for the Exchequer, which typically means around £3.14 for each £1 spent. **LR**

A photograph showing Tommy Richardson, a man in a dark suit, being awarded a medal by another man in a dark suit with yellow braided cords. They are both looking at the medal. In the background, other people are visible, some in uniform and some in civilian clothes.

Give that man a medal!

FBU member Tommy Richardson, whose work on water safety won him royal recognition this summer, is better able to support colleagues and members of the public involved in emergency incidents after completing a mental health course through his union.

As a firefighter who's battled blazing buildings and fast-moving floods, Tommy Richardson knows how any loss of life leaves its mark on colleagues in the Tyneside Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and family and friends of the victim alike.

So when he heard about a mental health awareness course available through FBU Learning, he knew he wanted to enrol, even though he hadn't been in a learning environment since joining the fire service 15 years ago.

"It was a bit daunting considering taking up this opportunity but once I had contacted (Region 4 Project Support Organiser) Ian Dick and we met to discuss further what was involved, I felt encouraged by what he told me and I agreed to sign up," Tommy says.

When Tommy started the four-month course last September, he found that having a month to complete each of the four separate modules worked well, as he could fit his study around his duty hours and put in time at home as well.

"I found the process to be simple and very easy to understand, with

very supportive and knowledgeable representations from FBU Learning that I was able to contact any time either by telephone or via email, Teresa Steventon and Tracy Lillico," Tommy says.

Through the course, Tommy has gained greater understanding and empathy with members of the public he interacts with at incidents and is better able to support his own colleagues both at incidents themselves and in their aftermath.

Since completing the course earlier this year, Tommy has progressed to taking a two-day Mental Health First Aid course through an external provider and is now very interested in training to be a Mental Health Awareness Instructor for Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service (TWFRS). And he says he would never have considered either course had he not enrolled on the first through FBU Learning.

And thanks to the FBU's learning offer to family and friends of members, Tommy's wife Julie has recently completed the Understanding Autism course and is looking forward to enrolling soon on the Children's Mental Health Course.

"To have been awarded something as prestigious as the Queen's Fire Service Medal is so humbling and makes me ever more determined to carry on."

In recognition of his sterling work in promoting water safety, Tommy was awarded the Queen's Fire Service Medal at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace this summer.

"All of the work which I have undertaken and delivered in water safety has always been done with the aim of reducing both incidents and fatalities in open water and never with the aims of receiving awards or recognition," he says.

"To have been awarded something as prestigious as the Queen's Fire Service Medal is so humbling and makes me ever more determined to carry on." **LR**