



# The role of trade unions in meeting the industrial impact of Brexit

**Andrew Waterman and John Earls**

As the UK plunges into ever-greater chaos in the wake of Boris Johnson's latest attempts to force through a potentially disastrous Brexit deal, the voices of workers and trade unionists have consistently been drowned out and ignored during the increasingly macabre political soap opera of the three years since the 2016 EU referendum. Division, confusion and frustration have gripped UK politics since 2016 and the labour movement has been no exception. In this climate, little has been done to understand the effect of Brexit on the lives of ordinary workers and trade unionists.

It is this situation that generated the impetus for Unite – the UK and Ireland's largest trade union – to commission a research project<sup>1</sup> that would analyse trade union representatives' (reps') views on Brexit and the impact that it is having in their workplace based on fifty semi-structured interviews with Unite reps across the UK in all nineteen of the union's industrial sectors.

Over the six months in which the research was carried out there were two extensions of Article 50, numerous failed meaningful votes in Parliament, fraught international summits and the resignation of a Prime Minister. The interviews were conducted in challenging circumstances with the economic and political situation sometimes changing by the hour but give valuable insight into Brexit's current and predicted impact on working people and the role of trade unions in meeting its industrial impact. From the outset three key issues quickly emerged: uncertainty, opportunism and the danger of 'Brexit fatigue'.

## Uncertainty

Brexit uncertainty is an issue that has affected almost all of the reps interviewed: 60% reported having been directly affected by at least one issue related to Brexit with the most prominent future concerns being the impact on jobs caused by disruption

to industry (46%), workers' rights (22%), safety regulations (8%) and the rise in racism (8%). Importantly, employers have played a particularly pernicious role in fostering uncertainty in the workplace. For example, only 36% of reps reported that their employer had communicated any sort of position on Brexit.

Unsurprisingly, manufacturing sectors reported the greatest concerns for their members' jobs in the event of a No Deal Brexit and the impact it could have on trade and just-in-time production. However, many reps also noted numerous instances of employers exacerbating these concerns, either with threats and warnings of withdrawing their investment in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a satisfactory deal or by simply not communicating with reps about their future intentions. Though Brexit's potential impact on manufacturing has attracted the most media attention, reps in all sectors feared the impact of a No Deal Brexit on jobs and the strain on already stretched public services in local government and the NHS. In this respect, Brexit has exacerbated and merged with existing issues such as austerity.

## 'Weaponising' Brexit

Interviews with Unite reps also revealed a distinct trend of employers opportunistically 'weaponising' Brexit uncertainty to attack workers' pay, rights and conditions. In fact, 34% of those interviewed believed that their employer is using Brexit opportunistically.

Of the reps who have yet to observe employer opportunism, many also believed that their employer would use Brexit as an opportunity to attack Unite members at some point in the future once the situation surrounding Brexit became clearer. Examples of employer opportunism cited by reps included using Brexit uncertainty to cast doubt on future pay deals, to delay pay negotiations (in some cases indefinitely), offer a reduced

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<sup>1</sup> The final report of the project – *Taking back control: Brexit in the Workplace – The role of Unite in meeting the industrial impact of Brexit* - can be accessed here: <http://unitelive.org/unite-brexit-challenges-workplace-research/>

pay deal, to increase agency workers over full time employment, or to suggest that they will remove Unite reps' involvement in European Works Councils (EWCs) should Brexit go ahead.

On the understanding that a trade union's strength lies in the workplace, the research developed an innovative analytical framework to assess Unite reps' industrial responses to Brexit using four categories: acknowledgement of their employer's opportunism; negotiating an agreement that defended or improved their members' pay, rights and conditions; mobilising members or institutions (i.e. EWCs) on issues linked to Brexit; and using Unite's Workplace Brexit Agreement Template to negotiate with or pressurise the employer to retain some or all existing agreements linked to EU membership that the union currently enjoys. Reps' responses to these categories were attributed a value which allowed for a 'score' to be given which represented the extent to which they were either 'static', 'pragmatically defensive' or 'proactively offensive' in their industrial approach to Brexit.

### **'Something we can shape'**

The results showed that 60% of the Unite reps interviewed are either actively or defensively engaged in action to mitigate the industrial impact of Brexit. Of this 60%, over a quarter (28%) have mobilised their members to secure an agreement that either defends (16%) or improves (12%) their existing pay and conditions. A further 14% of reps have tabled the union's Workplace Brexit Agreement Template despite not observing any employer opportunism at this stage. Importantly, the number of reps who are not engaged in Brexit-related action at present (40%) will almost certainly change once Brexit negotiations are finally concluded with the nature of the deal going a long way to determine the nature of the action likely to be taken.

Despite the paralysing effect that Brexit has had in many respects, even in heavily affected industries such as the Automotive sector, Unite reps have been able to improve their members' situation by proactively treating Brexit as an industrial and collective bargaining issue. This shows that Brexit

uncertainty and fatigue do not have to define Unite's approach to Brexit but can be actively fought against. As Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey points out in the foreword of the report:

"Brexit cannot be something which will just happen to us or be imposed from above. How it is experienced is something we can and must proactively shape, irrespective of the attempts to divide us. Above all else the findings show that unity on the everyday industrial questions that matter to working people triumph over the politics of division."

As this research shows, workers and trade unionists are not simply bystanders to the whims of big business and the government but can play an active role in the outcome of Brexit even in sectors that are in the grip of uncertainty and employer opportunism. For working people, the best way of opposing Brexit and repairing divisions wrought by the referendum is by fighting to defend and improve pay, rights, and terms and conditions as members of a trade union. The research also showed the importance of Unite reps continuing to be proactive in their industrial approach to Brexit, even as the uncertainty over 'no deal' grows. Brexit fatigue and frustration can become an industrial danger if they are allowed to lead to fatalism. The research suggests that Unite reps and members can be confident in their collective ability to shape the impact of Brexit in the workplace; mitigating any impact and advancing members' interests.

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