

**Profiles of Union Workplace Representatives: Evidence from Three Unions in  
SW England**

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**Introduction**

As part of a larger research project the authors are examining union responses to workplace and corporate organisational change in the South West of England (Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2000a; Upchurch and Danford, 2001;) This study has concentrated on three unions, the MSF, GMB and AEEU, and has comprised over 100 interviews of workplace representatives from the three unions conducted between 1998 and 2000 throughout the region across a representative range of industrial sectors. A complement to this qualitative research has been analysis of 356 questionnaire returns, concentrating on workplace union changes as well as profiles of the representatives and stewards themselves. Of particular interest have been the personal profiles of workplace representatives and their interaction with members. It is this data which is presented with some commentary in this Research Note.

**Key Debates and Issues**

Analyses of shop stewards and workplace representatives have been approached in the past in terms of the tensions apparent within their role and function (Goodman and Whittingham (1969), and the typologies of stewards' personal qualities and leadership style (Batstone *et al*, 1977; Fosh and Cohen, 1990; Bradley,1994). Heery and Kelly (1990) have also assessed the relationship between stewards and full time union officials. A longer-term debate has been the degree to which shop stewards and

workplace representatives have become, or are capable of becoming, bureaucratized and collaborationist in orientation (Hyman, 1979). Such debates flowed from a period of rising shop steward influence and power where the locus of influence had shifted from full time officials to shop stewards in the process creating considerable autonomy for shop stewards (Batstone *et al* 1984: 254-67). However, this power and autonomy has been described as being 'factory consciousness' limited to a large extent by a sectional orientation (Beynon 1973). This possible weakness was exposed as the employers went on to the offensive and sought to marginalise stewards in the 1980s, leaving them in a weakened position to counter new production and management techniques that needed alternative organisational and political responses from the shop floor (Terry 1989). Later debates have concentrated on the requirements of successful renewal of workplace union organisation either in terms of adoption of strategy (Boxall and Haynes, 1996), or within a discussion of the general context of the future of unions (Fiorito *et al*, 1995; Hyman, 1996). More recent contributions from Darlington (1994, 2001) and Gall (1998) have filled an important gap by concentrating on the political affiliation of stewards and its influence on workplace organisation. Both Fairbrother (1996) and Fosh (1993) have also raised the prospect of a turn towards more participative workplace organisation as a precursor of union renewal, especially when set against the context of managerial decentralisation of control and decision-making. There is, therefore, a rich source of debate and discussion surrounding the past, present and future role of union workplace representatives in determining patterns and processes of industrial relations in Britain and other countries where strong traditions of independent workplace organisation survives or thrives. Indeed, it is the centrality of workplace representatives in the relatively de-centralised British industrial relations framework

that makes their study of critical importance to an understanding of the management-union relationship. Whilst the WIRS and WERS studies chart a decline in shop steward representation over the recent two decades the numbers, coverage and influence of workplace representatives still exhibit a continuing resilience. This is a testament to past traditions of organisation as well as continued desire for worker 'voice' and collectivity in the face of hostile managements, the decline of collective bargaining, and new forms of work organisation (Darlington, 1998, 2001; Gall, 1999). However, despite the theoretical debate there is limited knowledge of the personal attributes of workplace representatives and the way they carry out their tasks. Such information is important in the context of shifts towards the organising approach to union renewal whereby recruitment and organising initiatives are encouraged in the union as a precursor to union renewal. The purpose of this research note is to attempt to make some sense of the data with respect to these preceding debates and issues. Analysis of the data is by no means complete but is presented here in order to encourage debate about the nature of workplace representation in the UK today.

### **The Research Base**

The three unions from which the data have been drawn represent a cross section of occupations and sectors. Data for the MSF have come from four sectors in insurance, manufacturing (including a large proportion of aerospace industry data), the NHS and universities. The occupations reflect MSF's sphere of influence and include technical and specialist engineering workers, medical technicians and health visitors in the NHS Trusts, and a range of occupations in the (largely) single union insurance offices where MSF has a presence. For the GMB, data were collected from privatised utilities (e.g. electricity and gas), nuclear power, manufacturing and local authorities. The occupations covered are mostly manual with a mix of craft and non-craft. For the AEEU data came from manufacturing and aerospace, private utilities and nuclear power generation. Stewards represented mostly manual craft workers but also some

semi-skilled and unskilled staff. The average union density for all workplaces surveyed was 66 per cent. For AEEU the density was highest at 86%, for the GMB density was 66 per cent, and for the MSF was 55 per cent. The unions are, of course, different in terms of their tradition and representative structures. The MSF adopts a system of senior and junior representatives as workplace activists and was one of the first UK unions to officially adopt the organising model, despite apparent tensions in the relationship between national and regional officials in its interpretation and implementation (Carter, 1997, 2002 forthcoming). Branches retain a relatively high degree of autonomy when compared to other unions, reflecting the dominant tradition of the old ASTMS within the new union (Carter, 1991). The AEEU has long had a system of shop steward representation at the workplace. A tightening of control from above in the areas of industrial policy and political activity has weakened the devolved district power structure that existed in the union's old engineering wing. The GMB adopted a steward system relatively late, as a move to a more open style and as an alternative to the over concentration of power with regional officials that has long characterised the union (Maksymiw, 1990; Fairbrother, 2000: 38-40). The variety of workplaces selected reflected different trajectories of employment stability and instability. Workplaces in the aerospace sector, for example, had experienced significant restructuring and job loss in recent years. Nevertheless employment in this sector is well represented in the south west of England. Insurance also has a strong presence in the region and has been growing in employment in recent years, partly because of relocation to the region. The profiles for manufacturing in general, privatised utilities, local government and the NHS reflect national employment patterns.

Two questionnaire surveys were used for the research and both were distributed consecutively to lay representatives of the three unions between 1999 and 2000. The first was a survey of all workplace representatives at a sample of each of the unions' organised workplaces. This collected information on the attributes of workplace representatives and their organising and recruitment activity. The total number of responses received was 356. For MSF, 196 responses were received from representatives in a sample of 54 establishments, a response rate of 46%. For the AEEU, 122 responses were received from representatives in 18 establishments, a response rate of 51%. For the GMB, access was restricted to one urban area within the

South West region: 38 responses were received from representatives in 10 establishments, a response rate of 66%. The second survey was of senior workplace representatives (or convenors) at the same sample of workplaces and collected information on union membership, recruitment patterns and organising facilities. The total response for the survey was 70. For MSF, 42 responses were received from 54 establishments, a response rate of 76%. For the AEEU and GMB, 18 and 10 responses were received respectively, in both cases a response rate of 100%.

### **Bio-details of the Unions Workplace Representatives (UWRs)<sup>1</sup>**

Tables 1 and 2 refer respectively to the length of service of UWRs with their current employer; the length of service as a UWR; and the age of the UWR. A consistent pattern emerges across the three unions.

**Table 1: Length of service of UWRs with current employer in per cent**  
(n = 356)

<b>Length of Employment</b>	<b>Total Number of UWRs (and %)</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
Less than 2 years	9 (3%)	2	8	2
2 - 5 years	33 (9%)	11	8	7
6-10 years	59 (17%)	20	21	9
More than 10 years	255 (72%)	67	63	82

**Table 2: Length of Service as steward or rep. in per cent**  
(n = 356)

<b>Length of Service</b>	<b>All UWRs (%)</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
Less than one year	44 (12%)	11	11	12
1 - 3 years	92 (26%)	25	29	26
4 - 7 years	74 (21%)	24	13	18
More than 7 years	147 (42%)	39	47	43

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Union Workplace Representatives' or UWR is used here to refer to stewards (GMB and AEEU) and representatives (MSF). In the case of MSF a senior representative is equivalent to a senior steward.

It is clear from the tables that UWRs are likely to have some considerable length of service with their current employer, with 72 per cent of the total having more than 10 years service. Length of service is highest in the AEEU, where 82 per cent have more than ten years service with their employer. These figures highlight the relative stability and durability of union workplace representatives which is also found in data collected in WERS, where the 'typical' senior union representative had been employed at their workplace for 11 years, with six of those as representative (Cully *et al*, 1999: 195). It would be expected that 'senior' union representatives had served longer in their organisations than 'junior' representatives. The relatively long periods of service in our survey of 'all' representatives might be a reflection of sectoral composition where there was a predominance of manufacturing and privatised utility workplace responses. Whilst these service years may appear high it may also suggest individual security within the workforce and a strong position and willingness to express 'voice' within the organisation. In terms of length of service as UWR the figures are also skewed towards longer, rather than shorter periods of union service. On average 42 per cent of UWRs have been representing the union for more than 7 years. The transparent stability of the UWRs within the organisation is likely to have both positive and negative implications. On the one hand it would enable a degree of trust to develop, both with management and union members, in order to represent member interests effectively. It might also highlight the 'activist' and/or leadership characteristic of UWRs, implying the pivotal importance of individuals in challenging managerial prerogative (Kelly, 1998:ch.4). Such stability of tenure of stewards was highlighted in the study by Batsone *et al* (1977) where it was linked directly to the 'leadership' qualities of individuals, and by Hyman (1997: 310) in relation to the different motivational qualities of union representatives. With this in mind the length

of service and relative stability of employment of UWRs may produce contradictory implications for union strategy and orientation at the workplace level. For example, some potentially negative implications may flow from long tenure such as a process of slow bureaucratisation of the stewards, perhaps linked to managerial strategy. Similarly, longer serving stewards may act to 'block' or retard processes of union renewal that might have to include the recruitment of a new generation of activists untainted by union defeats of the recent past (Fairbrother, 2000: 19).

Tables 3 and 4 show the age and gender of UWRs.

**Table 3: Age of UWRs in per cent**  
(n = 356)

Age Group	All UWRs. (%)	MSF %	GMB %	AEEU %
21- 25 years old	7 (2%)	2	3	1
26 - 30 years	23 (7%)	7	3	7
31 - 40 years	75 (21%)	22	24	20
More than 40 years old	250 (70%)	69	71	72

**Table 4: Gender of UWRs in per cent**  
(n = 356)

Gender	All UWRs (%)	MSF %	GMB %	AEEU %
Male	286 (81%)	72	82	93
Female	69 (20%)	28	18	7

It is clear from the data that there is a consistent pattern across all three unions in that the age of UWR is positively skewed towards those who are aged above 40 years. In addition, only 9 per cent were aged under 30 years and a mere seven out of 356 were aged up to 25 years. To a certain extent this is a product of an ageing workforce, which was a prevalent feature in most AEEU manufacturing and GMB utility service workplaces (but less so with the MSF in health and insurance). Our statistics for the 'average age of the union membership compared to the average age of the establishment workforce' found that, in the case of MSF, in 31 per cent of workplaces

the union membership tended to be older than the workforce; for GMB the comparative figure was 20 per cent; and for AEEU was 6 per cent. This again highlights an actual problem of finding newer, younger activists to take on the role of UWR. The relatively low difference for AEEU when compared to the other two unions is a product of the generally high membership density found in the AEEU workplaces surveyed. The lower density in MSF workplaces would suggest there could be problems of recruiting younger workers (although younger workers are also more likely to be newer entrants and would as a consequence have had less union exposure). The figures for gender would be a part product of the gender composition of the workforces. The fact that only 20% of the UWRs were women reflects the male-dominated gender composition of the unionised workplaces surveyed although a much higher proportion of women UWRs was found in the NHS (56%), insurance (46%) and local government (39%).

### **Reasons for Becoming a UWR**

Table 5 provides information on why UWRs took on their role, based on a fixed choice question asking 'why they became a union representative'.



**Table 5: Reasons for becoming a UWR (selected from eight options)**

(n = 356)

<b>Reasons for Becoming a UWR</b>	<b>MSF % response</b>	<b>GMB % response</b>	<b>AEEU % response</b>
Strong belief in trade union principles	40%*	68%	70%
To help fellow employees	64%	84%	79%
To help limit the power of management	14%	29%	30%
To become involved in decision-making at work	45%	61%	65%
To benefit career	8%	5%	1%
Nobody else would take on the role	52%	42%	29%
Other	11%	3%	4%

\*For MSF this factor was notably weaker for recently recruited representatives. Reps with more than 7 years service as a rep. cited 54%, those with less than one years service 23%.

The table points strongly to the influence of collectivist principles in the decision - making process, with particularly high references to reasons of '*belief in trade union principles*' and '*to help fellow employees*'. There is an interesting comparison here with the data from Waddington and Whitson's (1997) survey of union members over 12 UK unions conducted between 1991 and 1993. In their survey of new members a '*belief in trade unions*' was ranked by 16.2 per cent of respondents as one of the two key reasons for joining (the third highest ranking). The higher score registered for UWRs for a similar question in our survey would, as expected for 'activists', suggest stronger collectivist motivations for UWRs as compared to new union members. High scores are also given for 'voice' reasons such as '*to become involved in decision making*' and, to a lesser extent, '*to help limit the power of management*'. The 'collectivist' and 'voice' responses scored higher in the GMB and AEEU than in MSF, suggesting either stronger collectivist orientations in the manual and craft occupations

and/or greater individual internal voice mechanisms for the white collar and technical specialists of MSF. The relatively high response recorded for *'nobody else would take on the role'* needs to be treated with some caution. Respondents giving this as an answer would still have recorded some other, more positive, reason taking on the role of a UWR. The response may also reflect that there was no election to the position.<sup>2</sup>

Issues likely to affect the decision to take on a role as UWR are the availability of personal time as well as conflicting work based pressures. In all three unions UWRs reported that the role of UWR had become more difficult due to increased work pressure (82 per cent of MSF reported such; 79 per cent of GMB and 80 per cent of AEEU). This reflects a general intensification of work found in the qualitative surveys as well as, in some individual cases, an increasingly hostile management at either local or senior level. The range of union issues dealt with by the UWRs and their role has also increased. For example as table 6 shows where UWRs were asked to describe the change in their role in recent years. Particularly high responses were recorded for AEEU representatives in comparison with the other two unions with 78% *'more communication with members'* and 63% *'pressure from line management'* as recent changes.

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<sup>2</sup> WERS 1998 reports that an overall 58% of the union representatives surveyed had been elected, 30% were volunteers and 12% became representatives by other means (Cully *et al*, 1999: 197)

**Table 6: Change in Role of UWRs in recent years (n=356)**

<b>Change in Role</b>	<b>All UWRs (%)</b>	<b>AEEU (%)</b>	<b>GMB(%)</b>	<b>MSF(%)</b>
More Difficult due to increased work pressure	81	80	79	82
More difficult due to pressure from line management	47	63	55	34
More negotiations with line management	40	53	34	32
More negotiations with senior management/ personnel	54	62	61	48
More communications with members	61	78	61	50
More members' grievances to handle	36	48	40	27

Such increased pressures parallel general trends to decentralise managerial functions and control whereby the range and incidence of local issues needing settlement outside of national agreements has increased considerably. This has implications for a centralised steward system and, where it exists, for the servicing approach to unionism that will be explored later. Table 7, however, presents data on time spent on union business.

**Table 7: Time Spent on Union Business**  
(n=356)

<b>Union</b>	<b>Average hours/week spent on union business at work</b>	<b>Average hours/week spent on union business away from work</b>	<b>Total average hours spent on union business/week</b>
<b>MSF*</b>	3.5	1.7	5.4
<b>GMB</b>	5.0	2.4	7.2
<b>AEEU**</b>	8.1	1.3	9.4

\*Considerable sectoral variations exist for MSF. For example total hours in manufacturing were 7.1 and in NHS Trusts 3.4.

\*\*sectoral variations were also strong in AEEU with 12.3 total hours recorded in manufacturing and 4.8 in Electricity/Rail.

The data shows some variation between the unions in time spent each week by UWRs on union business. The highest totals were recorded for the AEEU, with sectoral totals as high as 12.3 hours per week in manufacturing. WERS recorded more time spent on union business in workplaces with higher density, and this is likely to reflect the AEEU figures (Cully *et al*, 1999: 201)<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, GMB UWRs scored higher totals for union work away from the business, which may or may not reflect lower facility time allocation than the other unions. The lower hours spent for MSF is no doubt partly a function of white collar unionism, and may also be a reflection of less transparency in recording time spent on union business within an office based work environment.

### **Communication, Participation and Involvement**

The process of communication between UWRs and their membership base is arguably a key component of the propensity to introduce more participative and inclusive forms of unionism as a precursor to union renewal. Fairbrother (1990) and Fosh (1993), for example, argue that the restructuring of work and employment relations in a more decentralised form opens the door for a resurgence of workplace unionism should the

<sup>3</sup> However, WERS recorded time spent by 'senior' reps.

opportunity for membership participation be grasped. Kelly (1998: 44-50), in his review of mobilization theory and practice, draws out the links between successful union renewal and the ability of local leaderships to express and agitate around senses of injustice in the workplace. Darlington (1994: 189), expressing slightly different themes, highlights the disabling effect that stewards' 'control from above' may have on rank-and-file consciousness and propensity for action. However, the distinction between participation, involvement and the concept of 'inclusiveness' in union affairs at workplace level is far from straightforward. Fosh (1993) rehearses the distinction between formal and informal participation whereby formal participation will include attending meetings and voting in elections, and informal participation would entail activities such as reading union material and interacting with shop stewards.

*Inclusiveness* is a function of the degree to which UWRs *involve* members in decision-making (through frequency of meetings, regularity of newsletters and surveys etc.) as well as the extent to which union agendas are *widened* to include issues of importance for women, youth and ethnic minorities as integral to workers' interests. A simple statistical presentation of communication methods thus runs the danger of missing some of the subtleties of interplay between UWRs and membership and so some caution needs to be expressed in interpreting the data with respect to forms of participation and involvement. More substantial comments, relying on qualitative evidence is presented in other papers by the authors. An example of such subtleties is the role of newsletters as a tool for union agitation and renewal. We found one instance, in an MSF organised insurance office of 43 per cent density, of a case where the UWR issued branch minutes and newsletter to both non-members and members alike and had effectively used the branch minutes as an organising and recruiting tool (Danford and Upchurch, 1999: 30). In another case, in one AEEU

non-recognised manufacturing site, the degree of potential management hostility to union organisation was so high that management would insist on vetting the newsletter before it was issued, thus limiting or neutralising its potential agitational effects and raising the alternative of producing unofficial 'underground' newsletters (Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2000b). Similar problems were apparent with respect to mass meetings, which were either granted within facilities agreements (and likely to be more 'inclusive') or held 'off-site' and out of works time. Again, this time with respect to members' meetings, UWRs were often forced to utilise unconventional methods within meetings to get their message across. In one AEEU aerospace instruments factory the senior steward would bring in his fishing rod whenever he wished to signal a dispute. When he suggested the members all 'went fishing' (holding fishing rod) he was using coded language to enact an immediate unofficial overtime ban (Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2001). Despite these caveats on subtleties Table 8 presents some interesting data on the broad sweep of communication methods.

**Table 8: UWRs Communication with Members (% using technique)**  
(n = 356)

<b>Communication Technique</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
Newsletters	62	26	52
Mass Meetings	35	13	15
Small Group Meetings	60	42	84
Individual Discussions	80	82	82
E-mail	29	0	12
Attitude Surveys	11	5	15
Other	8	15	4

From here it can be seen that that the most important method of communication is direct contact between UWR and member with scores of 80 per cent or over ranking

this method as the preferred method. We also recorded ratios for UWR per member in each workplace and recorded average figures of 29 to 1 for MSF; 51 to 1 for GMB; and 31 to 1 for AEEU<sup>4</sup>. With these levels of figures it would seem reasonable to expect that regular contact between UWR and individual member was possible, provided that membership was not geographically dispersed or split over shifts. However, these are 'average' figures and do not account for tracts or areas of the workplace where no UWR is present. Such raw data, however, does need to be cautiously interpreted in terms of its potential connection with union renewal. It tells little of the *type* of relationship expressed between UWR and member i.e. whether it be agitational and inclusive or couched in terms of 'management of discontent' and control from above.

The use of alternative forms of written communication, such as newsletters and e-mail varies between unions. Newsletters are used infrequently in GMB and emails were not registered in our survey (unsurprising given the job content of most GMB members). The higher incidence of newsletters and emails in MSF may simply reflect the office based nature of work, rather than necessarily a deliberate policy to use other communicative methods<sup>5</sup>. There remains a relatively low incidence of mass meetings, with a noticeably higher incidence in MSF. However, there appears to be greater dependency on small group meetings, which, in some cases at least, were geared towards regular and formal team meetings within the official organisational structure of the enterprise. In such instances the authors' parallel research found that UWRs had

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<sup>4</sup> This compares to an average of 1 to 28 found in WERS. See, Cully,M., Woodland,S., O'Reilly,A., and Dix,G., *Britain at Work* p193, London: Routledge 1999

<sup>5</sup> Although MSF National Office does provide an electronic template for the production of newsletters (authors' notes).

regained some control over work organisation and pace by directly influencing the internal workings of team based organisation (see Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2001). Taken as a whole the data would suggest a more open and participative structure within the MSF, and more reliance in both GMB and AEEU on steward control. In the latter two cases the organisational strength of the union may depend on the ability of the UWRs to adapt the traditional centralised stewards system to one which was responsive to devolved work organisation. Where this adaptation has not taken place the workplace union runs the risk of becoming ever more remote from the membership and unresponsive to members' everyday needs and issues.

Table 9 provides another indicator of UWR activity, in the form of frequency of UWR meetings such as joint shop stewards committees within the workplace.

**Table 9: Frequency of UWR meetings as reported by senior UWRs**

(n = 70)

<b>Frequency of UWR meetings</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
Weekly	7	0	38
More than monthly	12	10	19
Every month	32	20	25
Every two months	15	20	6
Few per year	19	30	13
never	15	20	0

AEEU stands out as having the most frequent steward meetings with 38 per cent meeting at least weekly. This might suggest a highly organised stewards' structure engaged in pro-active bargaining in comparison to other unions, but might also be a product of higher density levels and more developed facilities arrangements in long recognised workplaces. It was also noted in Table 6 the greater pressures AEEU



representatives report in dealing with the recent increase in local negotiating issues, which might entail more regular meetings to develop union response. In comparison with the other two unions, GMB is notable for the relative infrequency of stewards' meetings, and it is here that dangers of UWR remoteness are likely to be most apparent.

### **Union Recruitment**

UWRs have traditionally been the focal point within union structures to recruit new members. However, the decline in union membership throughout the 1980s and 1990s has re-focussed attention on exactly how recruitment takes place, how much time is devoted to it, and what are the most effective methods. Central ingredients of the 'Organising Model' approach are a reliance on innovative recruitment techniques including the use of 'mapping techniques' to identify non-members; the use of survey and focus groups to identify worker concerns; and the use of 'one-to-one' approaches to non-members, if necessary through house calls (Heery *et al*, 2000). All three unions surveyed claimed, to different degrees, to have accepted aspects of the organising approach, with the process older and more advanced in the MSF. It is most likely that senior UWRs have a wider knowledge of the workplace application of the 'organising model' rather than junior UWRs who, in some circumstances may adopt a more passive 'post box' approach to their union role. Table 10 shows, therefore, the range of recruitment techniques found in the smaller survey of senior UWRs. Each senior UWR was given a choice of questions on techniques, so in some cases multiple responses were obtained and in others none of the techniques were used.

**Table 10: Use of Different recruitment Techniques (Senior UWRs Survey)**

(n = 70)

<b>Recruitment Technique</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
Leafleting of non-members	49	20	61
Union Literature targeted to particular groups	39	20	72
Direct postal mail to non-members	15	0	6
Direct e-mail to non-members	5	0	6
Establishing a Recruitment Committee/Team	25	10	11
'Mapping' the organisation to identify non-members	34	0	17
Organising a Union social event for non-members	10	0	6
None of these techniques used	42	60	28
At least two of these techniques used	51	20	72

The data here would suggest that MSF is most advanced in using more innovative techniques, particularly 'mapping' of non-members and the use of specially established recruitment teams, whilst GMB is least innovative. The AEEU response records highly in the use of union literature. From the qualitative evidence it was found that the GMB have developed a systematic process of recruitment initiatives which rely primarily on the use of full time recruitment officers who are 'flown in' from the outside. This might help explain the relatively low responses recorded from the GMB senior UWRs.

Another indicator of the shift to an organising culture is the priority given to recruitment within the timetable of union activity. Data collected on the average time spent by UWRs on recruitment is presented in Table 11.

**Table 11: UWRs Time spent on Recruitment**

(n = 356)

<b>Average number of hours/month spent on recruitment</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
No hours	45	58	63
Less than 1 hour	9	8	14
Between 1 and 2 hours	37	22	18
More than 2 hours	9	13	5

The relatively high incidence of reporting that 'no hours' were spent on recruitment is difficult to explain given the data in the previous tables, and would suggest that in many workplaces recruitment activity is patchy or non-existent as a distinct focus of everyday union activity. Alternatively it might reflect the pre-eminence of senior UWRs and/or full time officials in taking recruitment initiatives, suggesting a slow process of downward filtration of new organising techniques. The exceptionally high incidence in the AEEU, however, suggests that in high union density workplaces new entrants are likely to recruit themselves by asking for a membership form, or alternatively, may already be union members carrying their membership with them from a previous workplace. We also collected data for the average numbers of new members recruited by each UWR over the last year and found an average ratio of 3.7 new members per UWR in the MSF; 5.8 in GMB and 4.5 in AEEU. These figures only assume comparative significance if workplace employee turnover rates and size are taken into consideration. Nevertheless, they do indicate considerable recruitment

activity over the whole sample. In MSF, for example, the numbers of new members recruited over a year represents on average 11 per cent of total membership (with some workplaces in the NHS and insurance sectors recording rates of up to 20 per cent). In the AEEU the average figure of 4.6 translates to over 1000 new members in one year over 17 workplaces.

Finally, Tables 12 and 13 offer data on the types of recruitment arguments considered most and least effective by the UWRs themselves and the perceived barriers to recruitment of non-members.

**Table 12: Recruiting Arguments as perceived by UWRs**  
(n = 356)

<b>Recruiting Argument (three most effective and three least effective from choice of ten)</b>	<b>MSF %</b>		<b>GMB %</b>		<b>AEEU %</b>	
	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>
Union secures improved pay and conditions at work	57	11	58	13	68	7
Provides support if employees have a problem at work	84	0	79	5	76	2
Provides protection/help when there are redundancies	56	5	34	11	46	11
Fights for improved H&S at work	29	10	58	3	39	3
Gives its members a democratic voice at work	11	29	26	18	26	20
Supports new groups of workers (women; youth; ethnic minorities)	4	41	5	40	12	32
Offers partnership with management	5	43	3	40	7	44
Has the ability to influence government policy	3	56	13	50	9	41
Offers free legal advice	23	13	50	16	36	10
Offers attractive individual services (e.g. discounts)	4	49	13	47	14	37

Once again, those arguments emphasising collectivity and solidarity are perceived as most effective. The 'servicing' approach to recruitment also scores strongly with arguments offering '*support if employees have a problem at work*' and '*protection/help when there are redundancies*' scoring highly. This has some significance for debates on the servicing/organising spectrum, and whilst the organising model might prove

more effective for recruitment there nevertheless remains a perception from many members that they require a 'servicing' relationship with the union. Exactly *who* services the members - the local lay officials or the regional/national full time officials- thus becomes an ongoing problem for the union. Without a concomitant increase in member participation and a self-reliant approach to workplace bargaining recruitment success can therefore be fragile. Arguments associated with widening union agendas and appeals to non-traditional members appear to score relatively low on effectiveness, especially that relating to '*support for new groups of workers- women; youth; ethnic minorities*'. However, this low perception of effectiveness may be a product of the very problem it is trying to solve i.e. the dominance within the union of 'traditional' older, mostly white male members and relatively low levels of member participation in steward-dominated, 'representative' union democracies. In many of the workplaces surveyed the language of partnership had entered the vocabulary of the UWRs, even though only a small minority of workplaces had a formal partnership agreement. However, the '*offer of partnership with management*' was generally considered to be a less effective recruiting argument. Similarly the provision of '*attractive individual services - e.g. discounts*' was considered an ineffective recruitment argument, although higher effectiveness scores were recorded for '*offers of free legal advice*'. Finally, relatively low effectiveness was attributed to '*the ability to influence government policy*' which has some significance given the generally high profile given to this in official union recruitment literature.

Table 13 provides further insights into barriers to recruitment. The responses reflect the perceptions of the UWRs themselves as to why non-members do not join, rather than reasons necessarily given by non-members.

**Table 13: Why Employees are not Union Members**  
(n = 356)

<b>Reasons given by UWRs (three principal reasons from choice of ten)</b>	<b>MSF %</b>	<b>GMB %</b>	<b>AEEU %</b>
They complain subscriptions are too high	60	42	67
Oppose trade unions in principle	36	26	36
Believe they can get on better without union help	34	40	45
Fear that joining a union may harm career prospects	41	21	35
Believe trade unions are too weak	29	47	37
Managers are hostile to unions	13	16	28
Trade union has links to the Labour Party	18	8	20
Have never been asked to join	9	3	2
Don't intend staying with employer for too long	12	21	22
other	20	16	6

The single most important barrier to the recruitment of non-members, in terms of UWRs perceived reasons for not joining, was the levels of subscriptions (a less important reason in the case of GMB). Individualistic arguments related to the belief of non-members that they could get on better without union help were also significant, as were a '*belief that unions are too weak*'. Such answers are likely to be unstable, relating to the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the union and subject to change over time and the influence of union success or failure when facing critical

incidents or disputes over substantive issues (Upchurch and Donnelly, 1992). More pertinent are the reported rates of incidence of those who '*oppose trade unions in principle*'. This is particularly high for the AEEU, suggesting a hard core of non-joiners remaining within an otherwise high density of membership.

### **Summary**

The data presented here are limited in scope and content to some key aspects of union workplace representatives' personal attributes; the way they spend their time; the methods they use in communicating between themselves and with their members; and their perceived effectiveness of the recruitment process.

The *dynamics* of the relationship between their employers, their members and the national unions as well as questions of UWR leadership and style are considered in more detail in other papers presenting the qualitative evidence. However, some tentative conclusions can be made. First, the age and length of service profiles of the UWRs across the three unions indicate a stability of employment with the individual employer which corresponds to data found in 1998 WERS. Second, there is increasing pressure on the time of stewards due to employers' intensification of work and a greater range of substantive and other issues needing to be dealt with than in preceding years. The qualitative data would suggest that more issues arise at local level rather than national as a result of managerial decentralisation and constant changes of enterprise ownership. New forms of work organisation, such as team working, are also challenging the efficacy of centralised negotiating machinery and emphasising the need for more devolved union power. This can cause problems for unions at workplace level where a centralised steward system has continued to work with a *modus vivendi* of operating and regulating national agreements, reflecting the political culture and tradition of the union concerned. Third, there are differences



between the unions (and within unions at sectoral level) in terms of the level and degree of inclusiveness and general participation. For example, in terms of stewards' organisation, the AEEU remains well organised with frequent stewards' meetings and regular one-to-one membership contact. Of the three unions surveyed, the MSF exhibits more examples of innovative communications practices associated with the 'organising model'. Generally, however, innovative practices (such as workplace 'mapping' and the establishment of special recruitment teams) are practised in a minority of workplaces and tend to be initiated either by senior UWRs or, in the case of GMB, by full time regional recruitment officers rather than lower tier representatives. Downward filtration of the 'organising' approach appears to be a slow process in the UK context, although key exceptions can be found in individual workplaces. The 'widening' of union recruitment agendas to encompass non-traditional workers appears rare. Recruitment figures for the three unions in their workplaces across the region were nevertheless good, reflecting continued union resilience in what has been a cold climate for unions in general. Finally, issues of collectivity and voice in the survey remain most effective in both motivating UWRs and recruiting new members. Perceptions of the need for unions to 'service' their members are also strong, suggesting that unions will need to encourage more self-reliance and membership participation if lay and full time officials are not to be overwhelmed by servicing requirements in a recruitment upturn.

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