

Decent work and equal pay?

- only with decent union rights

Dave Prentis, Unison General Secretary

Though UNISON only came in to existence in 1993, we have long memories. Thirty years ago the Thatcher Government was elected and passed a long series of Employment Acts, each restricting trade union rights further.

We acknowledge the welcome moves on individual employment rights made over the past 12 years, especially the national minimum wage and the recent introduction of 28 days paid annual leave for all workers. However, there is stark contrast with a lack of movement on collective union rights, the statutory recognition procedure aside.

Our collective rights remain severely compromised, with UK law on industrial action so restrictive as to violate Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Whilst workers have gained from the EU social chapter, and hopefully will gain next year from the agency workers directive, the latest threat to our rights and a progressive policy on public procurement comes from Europe too, the Posted Workers Directive.

Workers should have the right to take industrial action to protect their occupational, social or economic interests without being in breach of contact, without threat of dismissal

or discrimination or their union being sued for damages.

We need to make changes to the law on industrial balloting that presently frustrates or denies democratic processes. As a precaution UNISON, when involved in national disputes on pay and pensions, has to notify tens of thousands of employers, even though all are party to national agreements and their negotiators for the employers' are always notified of our intentions.

Trade unions are deliberately over regulated and this frustrates our considerable efforts currently to organise and re-energise our membership and activists.

There is a reason why union rights matter. They are, in my opinion, the most effective way to Make Poverty History and in particular for the Government to fulfil its commitment to abolish child poverty. Income inequality in the UK has started to rise again in recent years, and the collapse of decent jobs is at the root of the disputes at the Lindsey oil refinery, Vestas and London Metropolitan University.

You cannot have decent work and equal pay without decent union rights. That is the message of the last 30 years.

September 2009

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