

**The future for
unions
– What do
workers think?**

Unions21

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Introduction

In 2001, the TUC commissioned a British Workplace Representation and Participation Survey to examine the future of trade unions in modern Britain. Professor Richard Freeman (Harvard University) and Wayne Diamond (LSE) led an extensive research project based on this survey and two TUC publications resulted *What Workers Want* (2001) and *A Perfect Union?* (2003).

Ten years on workplaces, the economy and the political situation look quite different but the need to renew the debate about the future of trade unions has never been more important.

Professor Freeman gave permission to Unions 21 to use questions from the 2001 survey, and in early 2010 YouGov ran an online survey on this basis. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,224 working adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 4-17 January 2010. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the UK workforce by union membership, industry sector and business size. Responses were also structured by gender, age, working pattern, pay level, grade and regional location.

In March, Unions 21 published an initial briefing on the survey results focusing on union presence and effectiveness in the workplace. Whilst confirming that there is a plethora of workplace experiences and therefore no simple or singular narrative about unions and the world of work, the survey showed:

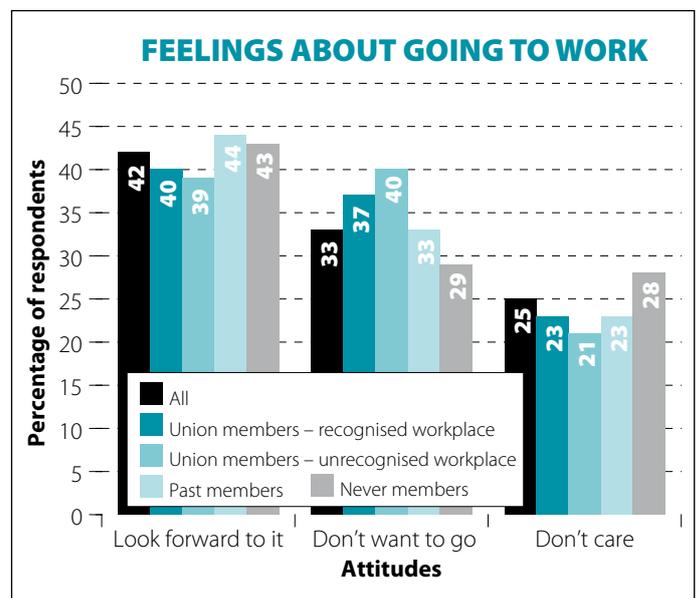
- Enduring belief in the benefits of collective strength.
- Members value highly the professional services provided by unions and non-members also recognise the need for such support.
- The challenge to unions to demonstrate that a collective voice is most effectively organised through the union route.
- Workers are more likely to be ignorant or indifferent to what unions do rather than hostile to union activity.

The survey also asked a series of questions about motivation and attitudes to work; perceptions about workplace relationships; what matters most to workers; and the quality and effectiveness of management and unions. These issues are explored in more detail in this briefing.

Motivation to work

On an average day 42% of all respondents look forward to going to work, compared with 33% who wish they didn't have to go and 25% who don't care one way or another. Workers in the voluntary sector, those in smaller workplaces (2-23 employees), with management responsibility, men and older workers (45+) are all more positive than the average about going to work. Workers in construction and education are more likely than other groups to say that they look forward to going to work, and workers in manufacturing and transport/communications are more likely than others to wish they didn't have to go. There is not a straightforward correlation between pay level and motivation to go to work. Those at either end of the pay distribution (earning up to £200 a week and over £800 a week) are the most positive groups, and workers earning from £300-£400 a week are least positive.

As shown below, past union members are more positive about going to work than current union members and those that are members of a union not recognised at their workplace are most likely to wish they didn't have to go.



Attitudes to work

The table below summarises a generally positive approach to work, with a clear perception that individuals work very hard. Interestingly there is no clear difference of opinion between union members and non-members about whether their job is interesting and enjoyable or that they are required to work very hard, but union members are more likely than non-members to disagree on other counts.

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
My job is interesting and enjoyable	64%	22%	14%
My job is secure in this workplace	53%	27%	20%
My job requires that I work very hard	70%	21%	9%
I never seem to have enough time to get my job done	41%	29%	29%
Managers here are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibilities	61%	20%	19%
People working here are encouraged to develop their skills	55%	24%	21%
I feel loyal to my organisation	60%	23%	17%

Workers in the private sector are less likely than others to consider either that their job is interesting and enjoyable (17% strongly agreed, compared with 27% in the public sector and 38% in the voluntary sector) or that it is secure – though feelings about job security elsewhere are likely to have diminished since the survey was undertaken.

Managers (25%) and workers aged 55+ (22%) are more likely than others to strongly agree that their job is interesting and enjoyable whereas one in five young workers (18-24) disagree.

More than 70% of respondents earning over £600 a week agreed that their job is interesting and enjoyable, compared with 59% of the lowest paid workers (earning up to £200 a week). However, one in five of the lowest paid disagreed compared with just under one in ten of the highest paid.

Respondents from education, health, social and community work are in strongest agreement that their work is interesting and enjoyable and those in wholesale/retail and transport/communications most strongly disagree.

At the time of the survey respondents from health and social work expressed the strongest confidence in their job security and those from the finance sector and manufacturing felt least secure.

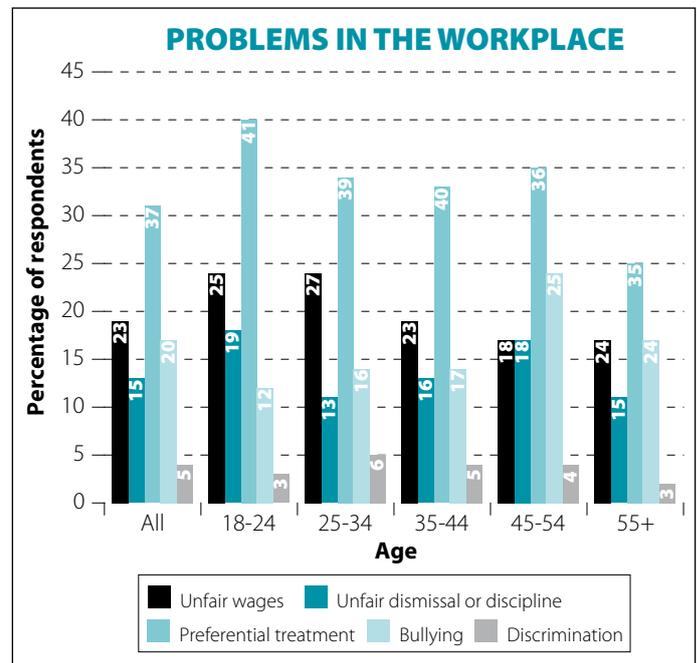
Respondents from the voluntary sector are most likely to agree that managers at their workplace are understanding about employees having to meet family responsibilities. Those in the private sector are most likely to disagree.

Managers, women and older workers (55+) are in strongest agreement that employees are encouraged to develop their skills and are also more likely to express loyalty to their organisation. Young workers (18-24) are most likely to disagree on both counts.

Workplace problems

Preferential treatment by management or senior staff was the most commonly cited workplace problem by all respondents, irrespective of sector, size of organisation or union membership.

As shown in the chart, younger respondents are most likely to encounter problems with unfair wages and with being disciplined or dismissed unfairly by management, whereas bullying was most commonly cited as a problem by respondents aged 45-54.



Trust in the workplace

25% of all respondents said that they trusted their employer a lot to keep promises to employees and 41% trusted their employer to some extent; whereas 23% said that they trusted their employer only a little and 12% did not trust their employer at all. Never and past members are most likely to trust their employer a lot (29% of each group) whereas only 11% of union members in recognised workplaces and 20% in non-recognised workplaces showed this level of trust. Around three quarters of respondents in education and construction said that they trusted their employer a lot or somewhat compared with just 54% in public administration and defence. Levels of trust were lowest amongst respondents earning £500-600 per week.

Relationships between management and employees

Overall respondents are positive about their relationships with management in the workplace – with 61% reporting excellent or good relationships and just one in ten describing relationships as poor. Private sector employees are most likely to report excellent relationships. Respondents from organisations employing up to 99 staff and non-members are also more likely than others to report excellent relationships.

Workers in larger organisations and union members are more likely to say that the relationship is only fair or poor. It is striking that one in five respondents from the finance sector reported excellent relationships with management compared with just one in ten in transport/communications and one in twenty in public administration and defence. Respondents earning £500-600 per week were most likely to characterise relationships between management and unions in their workplace as poor.

Voice at work

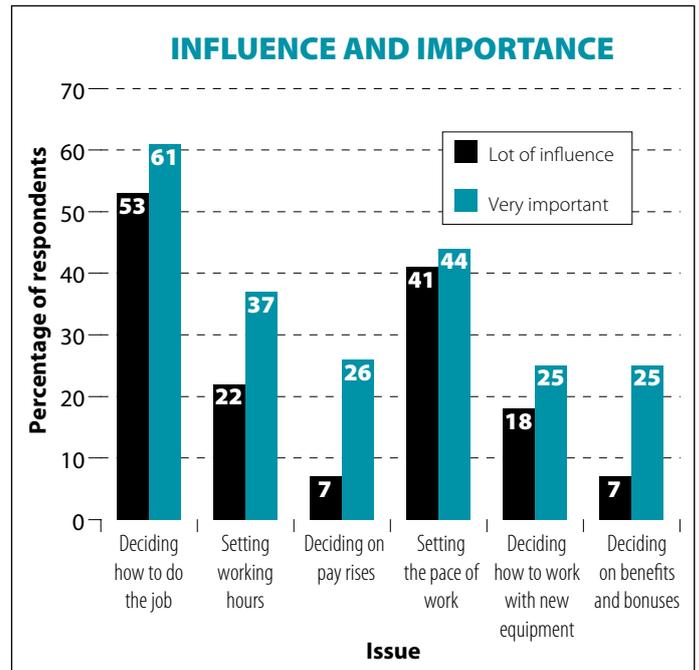
The table below shows that workers feel they have most direct involvement and influence over deciding how to do their job and organise work and the pace at which they work.

	A lot	Some	A little	None
Deciding how to do your job and organise work	53%	25%	11%	10%
Setting working hours	22%	21%	16%	41%
Deciding how much of a pay rise people in your work group or department should get	7%	7%	7%	79%
The pace of work	41%	31%	14%	13%
Deciding how to work with new equipment or software	18%	25%	22%	35%
Deciding what kinds of benefits or bonuses are offered	7%	8%	10%	76%

- Respondents' perceptions about their level of influence over how to do their job increase progressively with pay – 35% of the lowest paid workers think that they have a lot of autonomy compared with 75% of those earning over £800 per week. One in five of the lowest paid workers think that they have no influence at all compared with just 3% earning over £800 per week.
- When it comes to influence over pay increases, all workers are clear that they have little influence. Three quarters of workers in the private and voluntary sectors and nine out of ten public servants think that they have no influence at all.
- Line managers/supervisors, men and workers (55+) are all more likely than the average to think they have a lot of influence over setting working hours, pay rises and deciding how to work with new equipment or software. However, women are slightly more likely than men to think that they have a lot of influence over the pace of work.
- Respondents from construction and real estate are most likely to think that they have a lot of influence over setting hours of work and how to work with new equipment or software. Respondents from manufacturing and

transport/communications are most likely to think that they have no influence over hours of work, and those from wholesale/retail and transport/communications that they have no influence over use of new equipment or software.

The chart below compares respondents' assessments of the influence they have over issues that are very important to them. It is notable that the two issues identified as most important by respondents are those over which they are also most likely to think that they have a lot of influence.

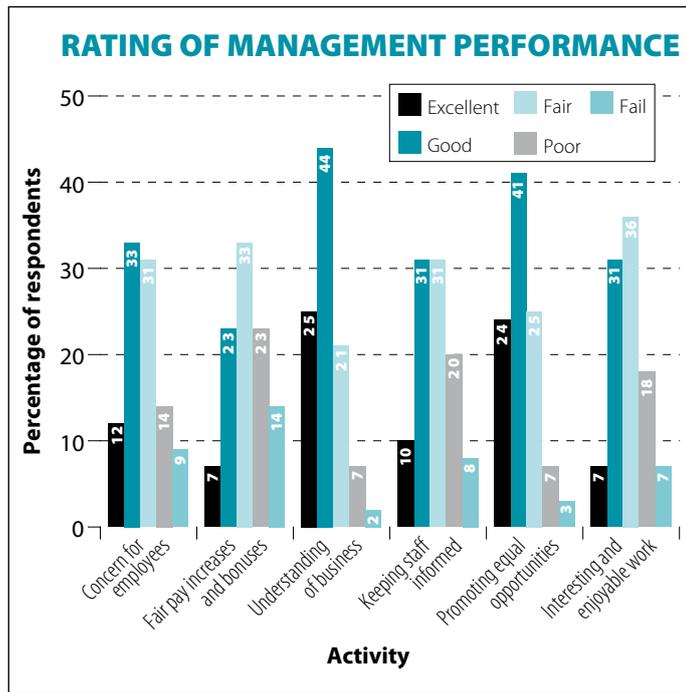


Overall 13% of respondents are very satisfied with the influence they have over organisational decisions that affect their job or working life. Non-members (16%) are more likely to be very satisfied than union members (6%). Satisfaction is strongest among respondents working in small organisations employing up to 23 people (33%), workers in construction (23%), and those earning above £800 per week (26%). Respondents' organisations employing 200-500 people (7%), workers aged 18-24 (8%), those from public administration and defence (2%) and education (7%) are least likely to be very satisfied with their overall level of influence.

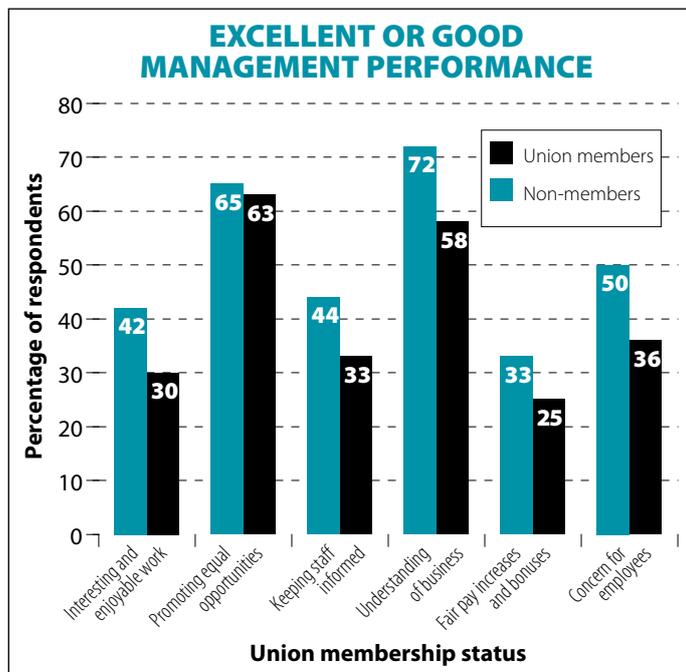
How good are management at doing their job?

Respondents were asked to rate the performance of management at their workplace. As shown in the chart, overall respondents rated management highest for their understanding and knowledge of the business (69% excellent or good) and for promoting equal opportunities (65%

excellent or good) and least favourably for giving fair pay increases and bonuses (37% poor or fail) and making work interesting and enjoyable (25% poor or fail).



The chart below shows that this assessment holds both for union members and non-members, though there is a gap between the views of members and non-members – particularly in relation to rating management understanding of the business and its concern for employees.



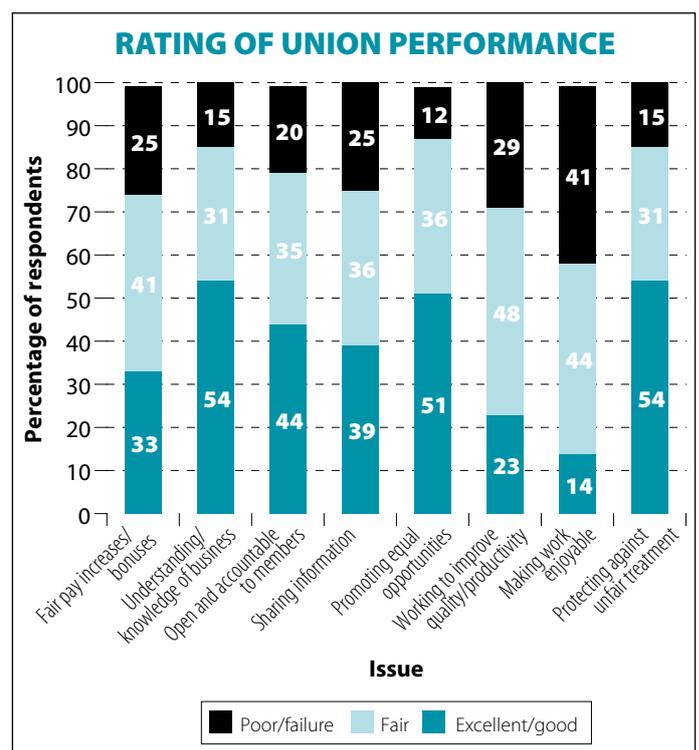
Respondents from the public sector are least likely to rate their management as excellent and more likely to regard them as failing on all activities except promoting equal opportunities, whilst those from the voluntary sector are generally most positive except in relation to

managers' knowledge and understanding of the business. Respondents from the private sector are less likely to rate promotion of equal opportunities as excellent but most likely to think that management have an excellent knowledge and understanding of the business.

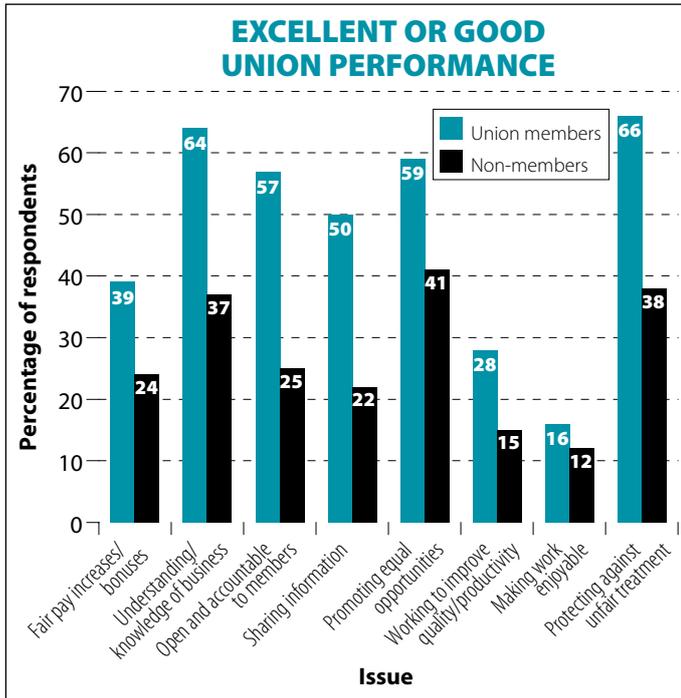
- Respondents working in real estate, and community services are most likely to rate managers as excellent in their concern for employees and at making work interesting and enjoyable. Those in transport/communications are most likely to regard managers as failing in both regards.
- Respondents from construction are most likely to rate their managers as excellent in giving fair pay and bonuses. Those in health and social work and transport/communications are most likely to rate them as a failure.
- Respondents both from the smallest organisations (2-23 employees) and the largest (1000+) are more likely than those in intermediate-sized organisations to think that management are excellent at promoting equal opportunities. Younger workers (18-34) are also more positive than older workers.

How good are unions at doing their job?

As shown below, unions are rated most highly for protecting workers against unfair treatment and for knowledge and understanding of the employer's business. The lowest ratings are for making work enjoyable and working with management to increase quality or productivity.



Union members are much more likely than non-members to rate union performance as good or excellent, though there is relatively little difference in perception about union performance in making work enjoyable.

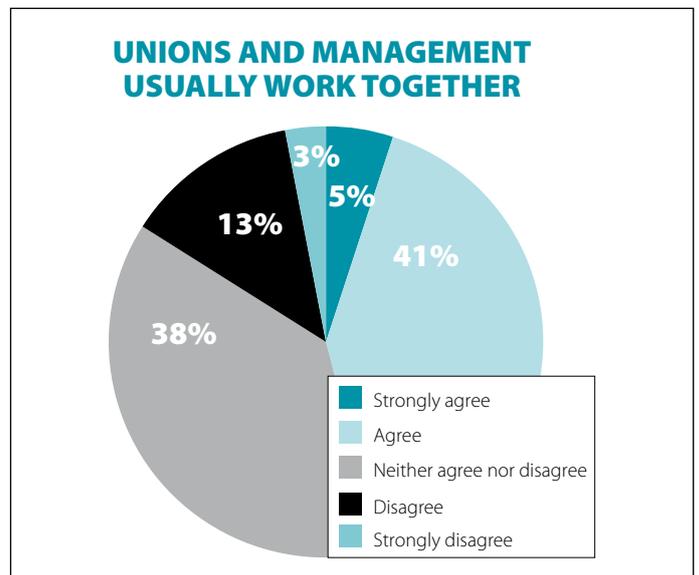
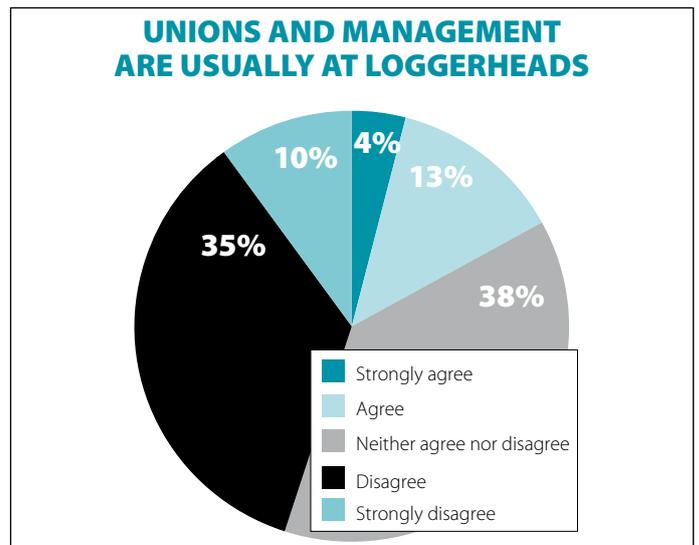


- Six out of ten respondents from the public and voluntary sectors think their union has an excellent or good understanding of their employer’s business compared with just under half in the private sector.
- Respondents from the private sector (37%) are also less likely than others to rate their union as excellent or good for being open and accountable to members (48% in the public sector and 63% in the voluntary sector).
- Respondents from the public sector are most positive and respondents from the private sector least positive about union activity to promote equal opportunities. Respondents from organisations employing over 500 people are more positive than those in smaller organisations.
- However, never members give a higher rating to union promotion of equal opportunities (36% good or excellent) as do past members (44%) than members in unrecognised workplaces (31%).
- Women are more likely than men to give the union a high rating for openness and accountability to members, but young workers (18-24) are much less likely to do so – 16% compared with 44% of workers overall.
- Respondents earning between £300-400 per week are most impressed by union knowledge and understanding of their employer’s business.

- Respondents from public administration/defence and education are most likely to rate their union as excellent for its knowledge and understanding of the employer’s business.
- Respondents working in education are most likely to give a high rating for openness and accountability to members.
- Past members are most critical of union performance in making work enjoyable (52% rated unions as poor or failing in this regard), though members in unrecognised workplaces were most critical of performance in protecting workers against unfair treatment (26% said their union was poor or failing in this regard).
- Young workers (18-24) are only half as likely as the average to think that unions are excellent or good at working with management to improve quality or productivity.

Union/management relationships

Respondents across all sectors are more likely to agree that union and management usually work together than that they are at loggerheads, as shown below.



In both regards there are only small differences in the views expressed by union members and non-members – with more non-members unable to express a firm view and union members more inclined to agree on both counts.

Respondents from transport/communications are in stronger agreement that management and unions are usually at loggerheads (11%), as are those in the East Midlands (10%) and those earning between £200-300 per week (10%).

Respondents from small organisations of 2-23 employees (14%) and education (8%) are in strongest agreement that management and unions usually work together.

Furthermore, respondents expressed a strong preference for a union approach based on working with management to improve the workplace and working conditions (77%) rather than one based on defending workers against unfair treatment by management (23%). This preference is shared by union members, though by a smaller proportion (64%). 82% of non-members, 80% of workers aged 18-24, 83% in construction, 82% in the South East and 88% of the highest earners. 30% of lower paid workers (£200-300 per week) and 29% in public administration and defence prefer an approach based on defending workers against unfair treatment.

Conclusion

These results show that, despite an increasingly difficult work environment, there remains a strong positive commitment to work. Two thirds of respondents said that their job is interesting and enjoyable and six out of ten feel loyal to their organisation. Further, respondents are generally positive about their relationships with management in the workplace.

However, there is no room for complacency. There is no singular narrative about the world of work, and the survey also reveals sectoral, demographic and economic differences in experience that are challenging for unions and management alike. For example, young workers are less likely than others to report opportunities to develop their skills and express lower levels of loyalty to the organisations they work for, but are more likely to encounter problems of unfair wages or unfair discipline. Low paid workers are least likely to think that they have much influence over how to do their job or the pace at which they work, and only 13% of respondents overall are very satisfied with the influence they have over organisational decisions that affect their job or working life.

Clearly there is still a key role for unions in protecting workers against unfair treatment. Yet there are interesting similarities in respondents' rating of management and unions on other aspects of performance. Both are well regarded for their knowledge and understanding of the employer's business and promotion of equal opportunities and both fare poorly for their impact on making work interesting and enjoyable.

It is also worth emphasising that, contrary to the impression often conveyed in the media, respondents across all sectors are more likely to agree that management and union usually work together than are at loggerheads and that there is a strong preference for this type of approach.

However this is a preference, and cannot be taken for granted. Seven out of ten respondents already think that their job requires them to work very hard and, under current Government policies, work pressures are likely to intensify at the same time that many workers will face a squeeze on pay and growing concerns about job insecurity. At this stage we can only speculate what effect these factors may have on organisational loyalty or individuals' perception of the interest and enjoyment they derive from work – However, the survey results are clear that this is not an issue on which unions are currently seen to perform well.

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