

REPRESENTING OUR SCIENTISTS



Andy Boseley
AMPS Workplace Representative

So you think trade unions are not for professional scientists? You could be surprised to find out what is really happening to those in white coats (and are not taking you away!)

Trade Union Membership in the United Kingdom fell into a rapid decline from the late 1970s through to the end of the 1990s but since this time it has remained reasonably constant at about 7.5 million members. We can only speculate the reasons why this decline has occurred and indeed why it has levelled out. One suggestion that is often put forward is that over this period the composition of the workforce in Britain changed; there was a gradual shift from a strong manufacturing base to one focused on service sectors. As the number of employees in industries typically regarded as 'blue collar' has decreased, the number in so-called 'white collar' roles increased. And with

a commonly held belief that Trade Union Membership in the white collar sector is frowned upon this has caused the demise of trade unions.

However in the latest trade union membership statistics survey¹ published by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, in conjunction with the Office for National Statistics, this belief is shown to be unfounded! The survey dispels the myth that 'professionals' are not interested in Union Membership. It found that for all employees, union density was highest in professional occupations at 44.3%, compared to only 23.3% in skilled trade occupations. So how does the Trade Union movement help this cohort of employees? The larger unions, such as Unite, undertake steadfast work providing the services required by the membership they represent; however members within professional occupations often shy away from the more confrontational style of Trade Unionism. This is where Trade Unions such as AMPS, the Association of Managerial and Professional Staffs, help to fill the gap.

AMPS is a growing, non politically aligned trade union association whose main aim is the enhancement and protection of its members' terms and conditions. It has a rich history of serving members of the chemical and allied industries that goes back almost a hundred years. More recently,

its remit was expanded to serve professional divers, especially those working in the North Sea Oil fields. Its membership really blossomed in the late seventies as it represented the professional scientists within the old ICI organisation; today it represents professionals and managers in over ninety different companies.

Like all employees, when things go wrong at work, professionals need a safety net! AMPS aims to provide this reassurance by minimising confrontation within industrial relations by encouraging the use of independent arbitration when serious disputes arise. There is a firm belief that the interests of members are best served through consultation and negotiation. The Association is fully committed to equality and fairness for all and we are wholeheartedly committed to looking after our members whatever their role.

AMPS is one of a number of small but specialised trade union associations that serve a growing number of professionals. Many of these, including AMPS, are members of the Federation of Professional Associations, which is a sector within the large Unite union. As Unite is the largest union in the United Kingdom, with almost 2 million members spread across most industries, the relationship enables AMPS to provide the best of both worlds; it is small enough to care, but large enough to protect. Whilst retaining its autonomy within Unite, AMPS can still call on the massive

resources available to Unite to provide unparalleled levels of benefits and security for its members.

In addition to its supporting role, AMPS helps the voice of scientists to be heard in the wider community. Members of AMPS regularly meet with the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee to ensure that the views of our members are heard respectfully within Westminster. The Association also has strong links with other like-minded organisations abroad. In the European dimension, AMPS was a founder member of FECCIA (European Federation of Managers in the Chemical and Allied Industries). This combines organisations representing managers and professionals in the chemical and allied industries of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK. Within FECCIA, common areas of interest and ideas are shared helping to provide unified responses to EU consultations and legislation.

So, if you feel that it is time you needed a little independent help, advice or support when dealing with your employer, remember this: many, many professionals are already members of a trade union; you are not bucking a trend, just joining the happy throng of people already enlightened.

There are many associations, such as AMPS, which can help provide you with protection in the manner you require. If you are a professional member of the scientific community log on and register with www.amps-tradeunion.com to receive further information.

¹ See <http://stats.berr.gov.uk/UKSA/tum2008.pdf> April 2009

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WHAT'S THE POINT OF A TRADES UNION?



Marijke Smith
President, Association of
Management and Professional Staffs

Why should we bother with Trades Unions at all? Do they serve any useful purpose?

Traditionally, Trades Unions were there for just that – Trades. They were built out of the necessity to gain better pay and conditions. It wasn't seen to be 'right' for Managers to have the same needs as other workers – after all, they were salaried and weekly paid staff could be laid off with less hassle. How times change. Our employment base is dramatically altered and our workforce is now mainly salaried and monthly paid. Proportionately fewer of us are paid in cash weekly in 2010 – but many of us remember fondly the feeling of that little brown envelope on a Friday lunchtime.

However, everyone these days is familiar with appraisals, employer/employee policies, performance measurement, gradings, capabilities, competencies and many more ways of ensuring that you are meeting the bottom line. As always, this is about human beings dealing with human

beings and personalities and temperaments are sometimes problematic. Every one of us is being measured in our workplace. We may not be aware of it in some cases; in others it intrudes – regular appraisals are an endurance test for large sectors of workers of all levels. Some commentators have unkindly noted that the recession has enabled some employers to get away with trimming the workforce and calling it recession-proofing.

This greater concentration on measurement of all employees means that all of us, whatever grade we are, sometimes need an independent voice when a problem arises at work. We specialise in management/graduate grades and have broad expertise in just these issues. How do you meet a competency? What is the difference between a capability and a competency? Answer: not a lot – it really depends on your point of view. What does matter is that you meet it in the required manner, and that's where the skill lies, in meeting the needs of the measurement in a way that satisfies everyone.

What can happen is that your understanding and that of your line manager or reportee differs.

Take this following example of a capability:

Actively promotes or participates in or creates unique opportunities that build and encourage the business.

The difference in interpretation is very wide, what is a real opportunity to a risk taker is foolhardy to one who is risk averse, despite demonstration.

Consequently, if you add in a personality clash you can see on the one hand this may be a very competent employee or someone heading for a disciplinary.

Unfortunately, many of us tolerate situations where small incidents are smoothed over or excused and not addressed. It becomes like water on a stone and finally one day becomes a raging torrent which can no longer be tolerated or endured. The time to seek advice is as soon as you perceive a problem, not the day before the disciplinary hearing. Trades Union representatives have generally heard and seen most things – and are very capable of spotting those who have perhaps not fully subscribed to the fair day's work for a fair day's pay. We specifically exclude here presenteeism (where people spend endless hours in the office because they are too scared to be seen leaving/arriving at the usual hours). It is fair to say that if the best course of action might be to seek alternative employment then your representative will not shy away from telling you how it is. They can usually see a dismissal coming from some distance. We have been known to summon the cavalry when required and can safely say that we have, on the odd occasion saved lives by being there and delivering assistance to distressed employees.

A Trades Union is there to assist the employees and

employers continue a harmonious working relationship. It is a two way street and negotiation always works better than confrontation. However, intransigence does sometimes occur on both sides and it does need to be worked through. Sometimes this can be more straightforward than others and skilled Union negotiators can be of great benefit in finding an appropriate result. The benefit of the independence of the Trades Union is that they can see from an impersonal perspective – it's not their reputation or bonus on the line and can frequently negotiate an alternative path. Unfortunately the cases that make the media headlines are always those where misunderstandings on both sides have led to greater problems – the ones where all goes smoothly and major issues resolved amicably don't get reported. Bad news always sells better than good.

It must be added that Trades Unions are also involved in negotiations for pay and conditions. Unions are involved in making sensible proposals that will enable the company to remain profitable but ensure the workforce is suitably rewarded and to manage the employees' expectations when the company falls on hard times.

So what's the point of a Trades Union? We are there to be mediators when two parties fall out to ensure a satisfactory solution that is agreeable to both parties.

... this is about human beings dealing with human beings ...

