
MODULE 2: UNIONS & SOLIDARITY

INTRODUCTION:

The primary aim of this module is for students to learn and understand the role of trade unions in society, their structure and how their services can be accessed. It outlines in detail how to participate in the work of trade unions, the benefits of membership and how trade unions can help with workplace problems. This module also provides students the opportunity to assess real workplace situations through case study work.

AIMS:

This module aims to:

- ✚ educate students about the history, background and development of Irish unions;
- ✚ outline the structure, function and operation of unions;
- ✚ summarise the benefits of membership and understand how to participate within unions;
- ✚ examine effective union representation;
- ✚ explore the meaning of collectivism and solidarity;
- ✚ provide students with a basic introduction to workplace procedures and how to use them; and
- ✚ explore workplace problems through case studies and role plays.

MODULE LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

At the end of this module students will be able to:

- ✚ identify and list unions operating in Ireland and who they represent;
- ✚ discuss the differences between union and non-union environments, listing the advantages and disadvantages associated with each;
- ✚ describe the development of the labour movement;
- ✚ describe the role of unions and their structure;
- ✚ describe the key elements of grievance and disciplinary procedures; and
- ✚ explore how workplace problems are identified and resolved.

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The origins and development of the labour movement

The labour movement is a social movement with many aspects and layers to it, including political parties and social groups. Unions are the key constituents of the movement. Unions are the oldest institutions in the modern world that seek to bring about change for a more fair and just society. They are also the only organisation dedicated to protecting and defending the rights and conditions of workers.

The origins of unions are rooted in the unequal relationship between capital and labour, a relationship based on interdependency but with conflicting interests. Capital refers to the owners of the means of production such as business owners and employers. Labour refers to workers and employees who sell their labour to earn a decent wage.

The power of capital can be countered by a well organised and strong labour movement enhanced by the power of collective action. Unions are the means by which workers are given a voice and influence over their working lives. The balance of the capital-labour relationship has changed over time, altering the character and development of the union movement.

The historical timeframe

- ↘ Trade Union Act 1871 – legal recognition of unions
- ↘ From 1889 semi-skilled workers organised general unions
- ↘ Trade Disputes Act 1906 – freedom to strike with immunity from law
- ↘ Late 19th century – craft unions formed
- ↘ Irish Trade Union Congress established in 1894 (precursor to ICTU)
- ↘ ITGWU (SIPTU) established 1909
- ↘ Labour Party established 1912

A historical picture

Over the last two centuries the world of work has changed at an unprecedented pace through greater industrialisation, mass production and transport, technological developments and globalisation. This has had a tremendous impact on how we work and the conditions in which we work.

Entitlements that we now take for granted, such as holiday pay, sick pay, pensions, protection from unsafe working practices, and workers rights were alien to workers of the past. What we now have and continue to fight to protect was never willingly conceded to workers but was hard fought and won by previous generations of workers, activists and trade unionists. It is because of the sacrifices and struggles of those workers that allows us to enjoy those rights today.

The changes experienced in living and working conditions is in no small way attributed to the work of committed trade union leaders and workers who understood the power of solidarity and collectivism. Life for ordinary workers was difficult and dangerous with little or no protection from exploitation or poverty. The following account gives us a brief insight into the appalling conditions in which people were forced to live in Dublin and the efforts of trade unions to improve them.

Dublin in 1913

Dublin in the early 20th century had one of the worst records of living conditions in the world. Thousands of families lived in one-room “tenements” and anything up to ten or more families lived in houses built for one upper-class family in the previous century.

In 1913 two houses in Dublin city, which housed approximately 40 people, collapsed killing seven and seriously injuring many more. An inquiry followed which estimated that over 87,000 people lived in tenements with 80 per cent of these families occupying only one room.

Children lived in abject poverty with many not surviving much beyond their first year. Malnutrition was rampant as well as fatal diseases such as tuberculosis or “consumption” as it was known, which were exacerbated by the squalid living conditions.

A quote from the Chief Medical Inspector for Dublin at the time indicates how bad the conditions affected children in the city:

“It is certain that infants perish from want of sufficient food... About 20 per cent of all who died in the city (1,808 in 1911) were children less than a year old and nearly all those occurred among the poorest classes.”

Employment was hard to find in Dublin, due to the lack of manufacturing industries, and at times unemployment was as high as 20 per cent. Most workers were employed on a casual basis in the distribution and transportation of goods. There was also discrimination towards employing workers from tenements who, due to their poor living conditions and health, were deemed unsuitable for work, thus reinforcing their already dire circumstances. The following quote by Arnold Wright, an English journalist, describes this sentiment:

“It cannot be overlooked, that the very nature of their mode of living tends to reduce their value to the labour market... they speedily lose, not merely their sense of self-respect, but their capacity for sustained exertion.”

In 1913 the labour movement clashed with employers in Dublin resulting in what is known as the 1913 Strike & Lockout. It began with a refusal of the owner of Independent Newspapers to employ members of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) who went on to forbid workers in the Tramways company to join the union. Workers who had joined the union were fired which led to a withdrawal of labour of almost half of the tramways workers.

Workers who distributed the newspaper throughout the city refused to handle it during the strike although the city's largest newsagent, Eason & Co, continued to sell it. The strike then spread to dock workers who refused to handle any Eason & Co goods to or from England. The strikes intensified with many workers, supporting the right to join a union, fired as a consequence.

The situation in Dublin grew worse. There were regular violent clashes between police and protesters and families were on the verge of starvation as strike wages were not enough to sustain workers who were already in poverty before the strike.

In a show of solidarity with striking workers, the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) provided 60,000 “family boxes” for the strikers, each providing food for about five people. When the parcels ran out, soup and bread became the staple diet for Dublin families. Although the British TUC organised sympathetic strikes in large cities in England, they did not support a general strike in support of the Irish workers. The outlook for the strikers was bleak as the food parcels from England could not be relied upon and support in England waned. The strike continued on past Christmas 1913 and into February 1914. On the point of starvation, many workers returned to work. It was some time after this that slowly the workers rejoined the ITGWU and it wasn't long before it was again the biggest trade union in the city.

The result of the strike was unclear although it fostered deep bitterness between the workers and the employers, due to the cruel treatment of the strikers. James Connolly reflected on the events and summed up the result as follows:

“The battle was a drawn battle. The employers were unable to carry on their business without men and women who remained loyal to their union. The workers were unable to force their employers to a formal recognition of the union and to give preference to organised labour. From the effects of this drawn battle both sides are still bearing scars. How deep these scars are none will reveal.”

The suffering and bitterness of the 1913 Lockout also had a profound effect on many influential figures in Irish society such as James Connolly, Pádraig Pearse, and the poets W.B. Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh, both of whom wrote works on the topic. The lockout also drew attention to the dire living conditions in Dublin at the time and resulted in an acknowledgement of the need to improve them.

(Source: Multitext Project in History from the Department of History, University College Cork)

Phases of trade unionism in Ireland

The labour movement, evolving since the 19th century, has experienced many changes, which can be described in four distinct phases, the first known as the Combination phase.

During the Industrial Revolution, single skilled occupations were organised, usually in one city or town. These groups emerged as movements of solidarity such as friendly societies and trade clubs, which were combinations of workers in particular skill groups and trades. Due to the uneven balance of power, workers combined together to improve their working lives. Although legislation made these combinations illegal, they continued in existence.

The second phase of unionism emerged as Classical unionism. This came about due to the belief that outlawing such workers' organisations only led to increasing social unrest. Social policy became less hostile to unions, which led to the slow development of unions in some occupations and industries but in particular, amongst craft workers. It was during the mid to late 19th century that unions began to negotiate wages and some unions that were established at this time remain with us today.

The third phase of unionism is described as Intermediary unionism beginning in the 1930s. At this time, Ireland began to industrialise and collective bargaining was extended. It was further established as the mechanism for resolving industrial disputes through the 1946 Industrial Relations Act, establishing institutions still with us today such as the Labour Court. During this period the pattern of wage rounds began, which ceased in the late 1980s giving way to what is considered to be the next phase, Social Partnership.

This began with the first Partnership agreement in 1987, the Programme for National Recovery. The philosophy was for unions to achieve a co-operative and broader position than previously experienced with a focus on social and political progress. Unions sought a wider influence in national policy affecting all workers based on equality across all sectors of society. The partnership process involves negotiations between the government, the unions and other social partners including:

↳ employers and business organisations;

↳ farmers organisations; and

↳ community and voluntary pillar.

Seven partnership agreements have been concluded as follows:

1987-1990 Programme for National Recovery (PNR)

1991-1994 Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP)

1994-1996 Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW)

1997-2000 Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment & Competitiveness

2000-2003 Programme for Prosperity & Fairness (PPF)

2003-2005 Sustaining Progress

June 2006 Towards 2016

UNDERSTANDING UNIONS

The union

A union is a collective group with common interests, which organises around the principles of democracy and collective action. Unions are the only organisations established to improve workers' rights and advance their position within society. All workers are free to join a union organisation.

The perception

The perception of how unions operate and what they are about varies among workers and, for those not active in a union, the only information they may get is media coverage of events such as a dispute, strike or redundancies.

Unions have a much broader scope and have a very important role to play in society. This was evidenced in research commissioned by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), which indicated that the attitudes and perceptions of workers towards the labour movement were quite favourable. It was also found that both members and non-members see unions as having an important role in Ireland in terms of protecting workers' rights and in negotiations with government and employers.

Compared to other institutions in Ireland, unions have gained increased confidence and trust from the general public. In light of workplace challenges, this is a very positive development in enabling unions to provide assistance to all workers. It is important that the ongoing work of unions, which often takes place behind the scenes, is clearly understood to allow workers to make informed choices about membership.

Their principles

A union is built on the principles of collectivism, solidarity and democracy and focuses on achieving its aims by advancing the collective good rather than individual interests. Organising workers into a group is an effort to change the balance of power in the workplace and in society itself. A union's strength lies in its membership and the ability to speak with

one voice through elected committees and appointed union officials.

Each union has rules that provide for the democratic running of the organisation. The form may differ between unions but there is a common principle that people are elected to different roles at various levels of the organisation.

The ability to organise, mobilise and motivate workers remains the most important factor to achieve the aims of the union movement.

Their aims

Collectively unions seek to increase workers' influence on social and economic policy and ensure their interests are represented nationally. This is achieved through national negotiations, organising campaigns and political lobbying.

Each union has a written constitution that sets out the rules within which it operates and to which members subscribe. Whilst the particular aims of each union may vary, striving to provide advice, support, representation, protection and progress workers' rights is to the forefront of every union's agenda.

Providing benefits for members, negotiating improvements in working conditions and taking industrial action, are a few of the ways in which unions seek to advance the cause of workers.

The following are some common aims of unions in Ireland:

- ✚ organise workers to obtain decent wages and rewards for their service;
- ✚ improve working conditions and protect interests of members;
- ✚ secure equality and prohibit all forms of discrimination for all members;
- ✚ improve worker and management relations;
- ✚ educate, train and upskill members;
- ✚ negotiate and settle differences through collective bargaining, conciliation or arbitration;

- ✚ promote the adherence to laws to protect the safety of members in the course of their work; and
- ✚ achieve social justice.

Unions also wish to have more of a say on issues that affect their members and at national level aim for:

- ✚ full employment;
- ✚ healthy economic environment;
- ✚ employment security;
- ✚ voice in government;
- ✚ improvements to public and social services such as health, education and transport;
- ✚ fair share of national wealth; and
- ✚ protection from discrimination and exploitation.

Their purpose

The role of unions in society continues to be debated as the world of work changes, particularly in light of the challenges posed by global capital. There is much more to unions than strikes and conflict. Unions are the protectors of workers' fundamental rights and organise to achieve that.

They have an obligation and responsibility to represent, protect and promote the interests of their members, which is achieved by encouraging members to actively participate in union activities. All members have the right to contribute and participate in the work of their union.

Although each worker has access to basic employment rights, there are times when employers may violate these rights and unions are there to ensure that the legal obligations of employers and the entitlements of workers are upheld. Unions also campaign for an increase in workers' rights, lobby government to improve employment protections, and raise awareness among workers of their rights through training and education programmes.

Their activities

The scope of union activity is very broad and includes:

- ✚ representing members on a collective and individual basis;
- ✚ providing guidance and advice on workplace issues;
- ✚ supporting individuals when they encounter difficulties or problems in their jobs;
- ✚ protecting existing rights and entitlements and ensuring employers comply with employment legislation;
- ✚ negotiating better deals for workers in terms of pay and conditions;
- ✚ providing education and training for workers;
- ✚ organising workplaces into union membership and recruiting members;
- ✚ ensuring local assistance is provided through workplace union representatives;
- ✚ campaigning at local, national and European level to improve the conditions of workers;
- ✚ negotiating with employers to ensure workers are properly trained and upskilled;
- ✚ ensuring fair practices operate in the workplace and members are not harassed, discriminated against or victimised;
- ✚ promoting respect and dignity amongst workers regardless of sex, background, nationality or ability; and
- ✚ promoting good health and safety practices and ensuring members lives are not put in danger at work.

THEIR STRUCTURES

National

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is the apex body of the union movement. It is not a union but a collection of unions to which the majority of Irish unions are affiliated. It provides guidance on policy, lobbies and campaigns on behalf of workers at national level, and provides leadership to the trade union movement. Affiliated unions work closely with ICTU, through participation in committees, conferences and on their decision-making body, the Executive Council. The role of the Council is to provide overall guidance and leadership to the trade union movement in line with ICTU policy and ensure decisions adopted at conference are carried out.

The ICTU operates in two jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with 58 affiliates combined, representing over 800,000 workers. In the Republic of Ireland there are 39 affiliated unions operating, of which 13 operate in both jurisdictions. They represent over 600,000 workers, which accounts for approximately 35 per cent of the Irish workforce.

Unions are not all the same in terms of their structure or who they represent. Not all unions look to recruit the same type of workers into their organisation. At national level unions are organised either by industry, sector, occupation, employer or some combination of these. They can be further categorised into specific industries such as craft, banking or retail or they may have members from a range of sectors and occupations, which are known as general unions.

Internal

All organisations have a specific structure designed to enable it to function effectively. Unions work on the same premise and are designed to maximise the involvement and participation of all their members. It is the democratic nature of their structures that provides members with the opportunity to influence and take part in policy making at all levels. Each union has responsibility for the constituency of members for whom they have secured representation and negotiation rights.

All unions have an elected national executive committee which is the decision-making body of the union carrying out decisions taken at conference and, in some instances, advising on policy. The rules for election to the national executive vary among unions, but in all instances members elect representatives or activists for a set period of time.

Some unions also have regional, divisional or sectoral committees where elected representatives from branches meet to discuss matters of common interest. The foundation stone of the union is at branch level, which is closest to the members. Branches can be composed of one large work location or many smaller ones, and fellow members in that location can elect workers to the branch committee. The branch committee, of which the union representative is a member, deals with common issues of a local nature.

It is important to remember that members have access to all levels of the union through their local representatives.

UNIONS AT WORK

What unions want

Unions aim to advance and improve working conditions for their members and the following includes some common topics, which are the subject of negotiations between unions and employers.

- ↘ Wages, overtime and shift pay
- ↘ Holidays and other types of leave
- ↘ Workplace facilities
- ↘ Sick pay
- ↘ Health and safety concerns
- ↘ Promotions, grading and career development
- ↘ Procedures such as grievance, discipline and disputes
- ↘ Conditions of employment and security
- ↘ Company information such as budgets, finance and future plans
- ↘ Work life balance issues such as flexible working, maternity pay and parental leave
- ↘ Facilities for union representatives

Representing workers

There are many levels of representation which unions offer to members and respond to and resolve problems of both a collective and an individual nature. In situations where a workplace issue impacts on a group of members, such as a change to working conditions, the union will first consult with members to find out what their concerns are. This then gives members the opportunity to voice their concerns to their representative and take part in the decision on how best to approach the problem. Once unions have a mandate (agreement) from members, they will then collectively bargain with management and seek to negotiate an agreement that is satisfactory to all. The outcome of all collective bargaining needs to be agreed by members and they are then given the opportunity to vote on it. Whilst this process may take some time, representatives regularly update members.

Members can also seek the help of their union representative if their issue is of an individual or personal nature. If a member has an issue which has not been resolved they should inform their union representative who will meet with them, gather the details of their issue, advise them and agree the next steps to be taken to resolve it.

THE REPRESENTATIVES

Activists

A union is run by and for its members and gets its strength from them so it is important that members take an active role in their union. All members have the opportunity to become activists and representatives. If members treat the union only as a service when they need it this may reduce the unions' credibility and strength to negotiate. Simply put, unions are not an insurance service when things go wrong; worker members have a responsibility to get involved in issues which directly affect their working lives.

An activist is an individual union member who becomes involved in the work of their union beginning at the local workplace. This involvement can range from encouraging fellow workers to join a union, providing support and advice to members, representing the views and concerns of members to management and negotiating changes to working conditions and practices.

Union/Workplace representative (Shop steward)

The core of every union is its members and a network of union representatives or shop stewards brings them together. Union representatives have often been called the backbone of the organisation as they are locally based, are the first point of contact for members and deal with most of the members' problems. They are "the face" of the union and the voice of the members. When members need support and advice they should seek the counsel of their union representative.

Union representatives take on this position either through local elections or they are appointed for a specific term of office. If an election takes place, the members in that location have the opportunity to vote for their candidate of choice. It must be remembered that this role is voluntary, unpaid and conducted on a part-time basis (reps still work for the company), so it is important they have the active support of their members.

Union representatives, with the help of their fellow members, ensure that new workers are given the opportunity to join the union, offer support and advice to members in times of difficulty, and keep members up to date with workplace developments.

As a fellow worker, shop stewards are best placed to offer assistance as they have a good understanding of what is involved and can choose the most appropriate way to handle each issue. They are at the front line between members and management and they have a responsibility to accurately represent members' views to management, communicate the views of management to their members and ensure members adhere to union policy and rules.

Skills of an effective union representative

There are a range of skills and qualities that are important for union representatives to have or to learn to ensure they give their members the best representation possible. These include:

- ✚ communication skills;
- ✚ integrity;
- ✚ ability to articulate the views of members;
- ✚ assertiveness and confidence;
- ✚ ability to effectively negotiate;
- ✚ capacity to instil trust in members;
- ✚ respect for all workers;
- ✚ ability to provide impartial and unbiased advice; and
- ✚ belief in solidarity and equality.

Full-time officials

All trade unions have experienced and skilled negotiators and organisers. In some cases these positions may be elected but a number are also appointed and employed by the union. Each official has a designated area of responsibility (varies amongst unions), which could be a large employer, a specific sector or a geographical location.

Their role is to progress issues if no resolution has been reached at local level and negotiate on behalf of members at a number of locations. They also have a range of other activities such as pursuing union recognition issues with employers, taking cases to industrial tribunals and organising workplaces into unions.

They are a very important support to local representatives who, from time to time, need their

expertise, advice and negotiating skills to resolve problems and reach a satisfactory outcome.

Union participation

Unions wish to include all members in their activities and are organised in a way to promote participation in discussions and debate. Unions actively encourage their members to take part in union activities such as attending their branch meetings. This is where all members have the opportunity to voice their concerns about issues and ask their representatives what is happening locally and nationally.

Members can also influence the direction and position their union takes by participating in collective decisions, voting for their fellow workers in elections and proposing motions or actions the union should take. Decisions for action at union meetings are taken after a vote of the members. It is therefore vitally important that all members attend their union meetings not only to find out what is going on but also to take the opportunity to have their voice heard.

The members

Members are the lifeblood of the union organisation but it is also in a worker's best interest to join as they are automatically protected from exploitation, dangerous working conditions and the erosion of their terms and conditions. Other benefits include:

- ✚ the opportunity to participate in decisions which affect the workplace;
- ✚ vote on issues which affect them;
- ✚ air grievances;
- ✚ gain strength from being a member of a group; and
- ✚ knowledge of their rights and entitlements.

Joining a union

Unfortunately problems do exist in the workplace and workers are not always treated fairly and justly. When this happens a union gives workers a voice whilst informing, supporting and advising them.

The fundamental rights of citizens are laid out in the Irish Constitution and Article 40 includes the right of citizens to freely express their opinions and convictions and to form associations and unions. The citizens' right to form associations and unions is qualified by the State's right to enact laws in the public interest.

The rights of citizens include not being forced into joining or leaving a union, or being dismissed because of union membership. For instance, the Unfair Dismissals Act provides that dismissal of an employee because of union membership or activity shall be deemed to be unfair.

Unions are for all workers and every worker in Ireland is entitled to join a union. No employer should prevent workers from exercising this right and no worker should be intimidated into not joining a union.

How to join a union

Joining a union is easy to do and the union to join depends on the particular sector and type of job. To access the full services of a union, workers need to apply to become a member, which incurs a small fee. This fee enables the union to provide a range of services to members such as training and education, representation, the support of full-time staff and other benefits. It also allows a union to campaign, lobby the government and grow the organisation to become stronger.

The fee can be paid weekly or monthly to the union, the amount of which is generally based on a member's earnings. Some unions also have reduced rates for casual, student and part-time workers. This is usually either deducted at source from the member's wages or from their bank account by direct debit.

If a worker is in a workplace where there is union representation, contact should be made with the union representative who will provide an application form to join. Generally union representatives will contact new recruits and encourage them to join by explaining the work of the union.

If there is no union presence in the workplace and a worker wishes to join a union they should discuss the option of joining a union with other work colleagues and try to identify the most appropriate union to join.

If workers are not sure they can contact UnionConnect or the ICTU who will be able to provide guidance.

Benefits of membership

The decision to join a union can be based on a wide variety of reasons but the realisation that a group can achieve more benefits than an individual is perhaps one of the most powerful. Workers are collectively represented and it is this collective strength that enables workers to bargain with management to progress and improve their working conditions.

Union members receive support during any difficulties they might experience and other benefits include:

- more likely to get better pay and improved leave arrangements;
- protection from exploitation and harassment;
- access to their rights and entitlements;
- support and representation for individual grievances; and
- less likely to be injured at work, discriminated against or sacked without just cause.

Union vs non-union environments

The difference between the conditions for workers in both environments can be stark. The following table outlines just some of those differences:

Union Environment	Non-union environment
Rely on individual and union strength and support.	Can only rely on individual strength and support.
Rules and conditions are the basis of negotiations between the union and the employer.	The employer makes all the rules and imposes changes without consultation.
Workplace procedures, negotiated with the union, are put in place to ensure rules are applied fairly and equally.	The employer can enforce rules and changes as they see fit.
Unions and employers negotiate pay, benefits and conditions to a satisfactory conclusion for all workers.	The employer decides on the pay, benefits and conditions that will apply in their work environment.
Workers have more protection through representation, support and advice.	Workers do not have access to representation within their workplace.

Solving problems in the workplace

Union representatives have a number of roles and responsibilities as outlined in an earlier section. This section looks at some specific areas where representation is crucial.

Grievances

A grievance is a problem or issue that arises in the workplace and generally occurs when a worker feels their employer has unfairly treated them. In unionised environments a procedure to deal with grievances is generally negotiated between the union and the employer. This outlines how problems should be dealt with in a systematic way, provides the steps that should be taken and allows the issue to advance if no progress is made locally.

The elements of a good procedure

- It should outline the stages of the procedure with time limits attached.
- The worker must first inform the supervisor or local manager of the issue.
- If it remains unresolved the union representative then takes up the issue.
- Almost all stages of the procedure take place within the workplace.

Discipline

Within every workplace there are acceptable forms of behaviour and levels of performance to which workers are expected to conform. On starting a new job, each worker should be made aware of these norms.

If a worker is considered to have acted outside what is acceptable, management may initiate disciplinary action. Disciplinary action should be covered by an agreed disciplinary procedure negotiated between the union and the employer. All workers are entitled to representation if such an action happens and should never go to a disciplinary hearing alone.

The elements of a good disciplinary procedure

- ✚ It should adhere to the principles of natural justice and fairness.
- ✚ The procedure should be clear, rational and fair with penalties for breaches clearly outlined.
- ✚ Time allowed for workers to respond to any suggested breaches.
- ✚ All workers should be made aware of the procedure.
- ✚ The procedure should contain a number of stages, which can include:
 - first and/or second verbal warning;
 - first written warning; and
 - final written warning.

Collective bargaining and agreements

Collective bargaining is one of the most important tools for unions and their representatives. It is a process by which unions collectively negotiate agreements with employers affecting all workers and takes place in unionised environments. It is important because the bargaining position of a group of workers is far stronger than that of an individual. If there is an equal balance and relationship between the union and employer, this can be a very constructive way to deal with all workplace issues to the satisfactory conclusion of all concerned.

The outcome of a successful collective bargaining process is a collective agreement, which can cover a broad range of issues from pay and conditions to training and equal opportunities to consultation procedures. A collective agreement sets out how each party will deal with the topic at hand, ensuring workers are protected and preventing employers imposing adverse conditions on an individual basis.

Young people and unions

Many young people are concerned with the effect the changing economic climate will have on their future prospects and on terms and conditions when they take up work. Obtaining decent work for young people is a challenge to all unions and affects workers in all countries.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (more details in **Module 4**), young women and men are two to three times more likely to be unemployed than adults, working unacceptably long hours under informal, intermittent and insecure work arrangements characterised by low productivity, meagre earnings and reduced labour protection.

Although the youth unemployment rate has declined, it still remains a strong concern for many countries.

“Governments are disturbed by higher than average rates and continue to experiment with policies and programmes that aim to smooth the transition from school to work for the youth population while targeting population segments that are most at risk of social exclusion.” (Global Employment Trends for Youth October 2008, ILO)

The concerns of young people are of enormous importance to unions as workers and potential leaders of the future. Young people tend to experience similar problems to those of workers everywhere, although they can experience additional exploitation and abuse due to a perceived or real lack of experience and knowledge.

Youth Committees are established both in Congress and in individual unions, the former deals with the broader issues of concern to young people at work,

the latter deals with issues of a more specific nature. In general, both aim to improve conditions for young workers, provide education and awareness on their rights and encourage more participation.

Student Representation

Young people, even if they are not workers, still have a representative structure at local, national and international level by the “Student Council”. Each Student Council is supported at a national level by the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union (ISSU).

School is the place where young people spend the majority of their waking hours. It is perhaps the most important community, other than home, in which they participate. For many it is a positive experience, but for others it is something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children and young people have the “right to express views freely in all matters affecting them”. This includes views and opinions on schooling. See handout sheet 2 at the end of this module.

STUDENT COUNCILS: Democratic, student led, student voice

The student council in your school gives you an opportunity to raise your voice and get involved in your school. It’s all about students having a say and influencing change in your school. Teachers and school management generally welcome constructive opinions from students on issues that affect students.

For a student council to be successful, it must be democratic. Democratic elections must be held every year and students should drive the agenda of the council. Remember, a student council is a forum for student voice and they are a powerful tool in making students feel that their voice matters. See handouts 1 and 2 for information on the Irish Education Act 1998 and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ISSU: Connecting students and giving students a voice

ISSU is a not-for-profit, voluntary student rights’ organisation here to represent the second-level students of Ireland!

ISSU is the national umbrella body for school student councils, aiming to represent and connect Irish second-level students the length and breadth of the country. It ensures that the voice of the Irish second-level student is heard and strives for innovation and democracy within the education system.

ISSU believes that young people are not merely citizens in waiting. They deserve better and deserve to be heard. Young people can and will contribute positively to society. It is so important that their voices, views and opinions are (i) heard (ii) listened to (iii) and most importantly respected. This is what ISSU is all about. They’re here for you. The aims of the organisation include:

- to provide training and development of second-level school student councils, in conjunction with relevant bodies;
- develop policies on issues affecting Irish second-level students and bring the needs and rights of students to the attention of the relevant authorities;
- provide a transparent, democratic and reliable organisation;
- work in collaboration with other educational institutions and bodies both in Ireland and Europe;
- work closely with educational curriculum policy makers and teachers’ unions to continually develop a transparent, fair and modern education system; and
- give students a structured platform through which the voice of Irish second-level students will be heard.

Students from all second-level schools can get involved with the ISSU and establish student councils in order to participate in their work. Further information can be found at www.issu.ie and on their Facebook page.

For information on related topics go to www.youth-connect.ie