

# Join the learning revolution!

More than 200 Community members are revolutionising the lives of their fellow workers - come and join the learning revolution!

Community now has 228 members who are active Union Learning Reps; men and women trained to revolutionise the lives of individuals, families, indeed communities, by persuading fellow workers that they could benefit from learning - and then making it happen.

'Their role is vital,' says Lyndon Peach, who heads up the union's training arm, *communitas*. 'By training, people can improve their prospects, fit themselves better to their work, or start new careers. In years to come people will probably have two, three, even four different careers during their working lives. They're going to need the training from somewhere.'

'We encourage all workers to undergo training, gain NVQs and be ready to change jobs if they are made redundant or be ready to move on up the ladder.'

Union Learning Reps are now an integral part of Community's branch structure. They are nominated and elected by members. 'Our aim is to have one rep for every 50 members,' Lyndon adds.

One of the key roles of a rep is to negotiate time off for learning with employers and to develop 'learning agreements' with companies. 'It's very important to get employers onside,' Lyndon says.

Funds for the development of Union Learning Reps have come from the government, which strongly supports the scheme. The money is used to sustain learning opportunities and embed the Union Learning scheme into union branch structures.

'The government hopes that Union Learning Reps will be part and parcel of a union branch, as they are becoming in Community and that learning will be a part of mainstream branch activities,' Assistant General Secretary Roy Rickhuss declares. 'In the long term, unions are expected to bear the costs of the scheme themselves, just like they meet the costs of other activities like organising and bargaining.'

Community has just had its funds from the government confirmed for the year 2007 to 2008 and it is thought that funds will be available to unions till 2010, but this has yet to be approved by Parliament.

'What we are now going to do now,' says Roy, who as Assistant General Secretary oversees education in the union, 'is to focus on the education of the union's officers and organisers, its branch secretaries and key activists, to ensure they fully understand the link between union learning and the core issues of recruitment and retention. Union Learning Reps themselves will be encouraged to take a wide range of development courses to prepare them for the challenges ahead.'

'It's vital that our reps are seen by members as key branch officials. That they see them on site, that they know who they are, that they can speak freely to them and trust them implicitly.'

Many a union member has had a quiet word with a Union Learning Rep and explained that they actually can't read or write. They manage to hide the fact, but they'd like to break out of the isolation they feel. The reps have found the basic skills training required and members have gained a new dimension to their lives.

The reps need to be able to provide everyday training advice, but also be up to date with the latest schemes like Basic and Key Skills, *learn*direct, NVQs and foundation degrees. They also need an understanding of professional qualifications available.

'We want every member to have access to a trained Union Learning Rep who can help them to access learning and fulfill their potential,' says Community General Secretary Michael Leahy.

Lyndon Peach is excited about a new government scheme called *Train to Gain*. It is a new skills programme introduced across England during 2006. It offers employers free training for employees to achieve an NVQ level 2 qualification or a new *Skills for Life* qualification, and there is some provision for training at NVQ level 3 as well.

*Train to Gain* offers opportunities for trade unions to get involved in the scheme which not only offers employers free training for their employees but offers workers paid time off for training. Everyone gains. And, of course, those undertaking training will gain most of all.

'It's an exciting time for Union Learning Reps,'



Union Learning Reps Richard Deacon, Paul Thomas and Christopher Dodd (left to right) at the Corus Steel Packaging Recycling plant in Trostre, Carmarthenshire

Lyndon Peach says, 'and I'd love to hear from any Community member who would like to discuss the possibility of becoming a rep. We can explain what is involved, how much time the task takes, and give them an understanding of the immensely satisfying and valuable role they could play.'

'We will help all interested members to gain the skills and the confidence they need.'

'Once you are trained as a Union Learning Rep that is only the

start of your own personal development. Reps themselves will have a lot of training and a range of new opportunities. Union Learning Reps are trusted and respected branch officials, their work is attracting a whole range of new people to trade unionism.'

Any member who might be interested in becoming a Union Learning Rep should speak to their branch secretary or regional office who will put them in touch with the project officer operating in their region.

## Training course in Region 1

Region 1 hosted the annual four day regional school for Community representatives and branch secretaries in April.

This is part one of a two-tiered structured course covering basic organising and negotiation skills to empower Community representatives to support their colleagues in the work place.

This year, 12 students attended from a diverse mixture of industries including bookmakers, steel works, textiles and manufacturing.

The students said they found the course to be very informative and interesting and a great confidence and team building exercise.



Participants at the regional school