

How the Costas came to Corby

How the Union Learning Reps at Corus Tubes added a dash of Spanish spice to create a special Learning at Work day, proving that being a ULR doesn't have to be all work and no play.



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Community member Josh Murphy considers signing up for the Spanish course.

Some of the workers at Corus Tubes in Corby, Northamptonshire swapped the canteen's usual pie and chips for tapas on a special Learning at Work day in May.

Not only did the event involve food for the stomach but also food for the mind. Workers had to order their meal in Spanish, with a little help on pronunciation from Spanish tutor Ana Paula Pereira. Other activities during the day were themed around the staff being on holiday in Spain and having to get by in language.

The event was organised by some of the huge Corus plant's 12 Union Learning Reps. Paul McKenna, lead ULR said: 'We wanted to encourage people into learning and make it fun. Lots of our colleagues holiday in Spain so starting up a Spanish beginners' course seemed a good idea.' The aim of the event was to get workers to sign up for a seven-week evening and weekend course – and by the end of the day all the places were taken.

'We applied and got £300 funding from Campaign for Learning who were impressed by our innovative idea,' Paul adds. 'Around half of that was spent on organising the day and the rest on Spanish for beginners books. The books will be housed in the library of our new learning centre library opened at the end of June - the result of the ULRs' hard work and the Corus management who are proactive and committed to helping its workers learn.'

Corby is the second Corus plant to sign a learning agreement with Community and in the year since then the management have seen the benefits of workplace learning in the increasing skills levels among its staff. The company is providing dedicated training rooms, computers and other equipment for the new learning centre which will offer a range of courses – some vocational such as basic IT skills, others more interest-based such as Spanish.

Nationally Community has more than 200 trained ULRs who provide their work colleagues with chances to learn new skills or refresh old ones by acting as a link between them and educational organisations in their area. 'Through the Community Union Learning Fund we have won funding until 2010 to recruit around 75 ULRs and re-engage with existing ones throughout the UK, Communitas ULF Project Officer Mick Brightman explains.

So what does it take to be a ULR? 'ULRs are ordinary people who do something extraordinary,' explains Communitas,' says Mick. 'There are no tests or exams and you don't need qualifications – you just need to be a member of Community and be interested in helping others become learners. We provide the training and support' - a

five-day TUC-Community course where ULRs learn how to interview people, find out about their learning needs, source courses, support learners and work with employers – a wide range of skills.

Paul McKenna is branch secretary for Corus 11, a team member in Corus mill and dad of two, so why add being lead ULR into an already busy life? 'In this industry a lot of people come straight from school often with poor basic skills. I saw that many wanted to learn but there was no route, As a ULR I've been able to help people grab learning opportunities they might not have had when they were younger.'

'The interest has been incredible in the three years I've been involved,' adds Paul. While the main demand is for IT and language skills, I've been particularly impressed with those needing help with literacy and numeracy – it's a big thing for middle-aged steelworkers to admit they have issues with these.

'As a ULR you get the satisfaction of seeing people learn new skills, grow in confidence get on in life when they didn't think they could. That's not to say it's without its challenges. This is a huge site with more than 800 workers, with each branch having their own ULR so it's important that we work closely together. Another issue we have to consider is how we can organise courses when many employees are on shift work.'

Looking to the future and the opening of the new learning centre, Paul would like to see more people gaining basic IT skills, which are 'needed so much in the workplace and at home', more building up their numeracy and literacy skills, and the provision of English for Speaker of Other Language courses to address the needs of migrant workers – as well as, obviously, more ULRs

'To be a ULR you just need to want to do it – anybody can,' says Paul. It's about getting the message across that learning can be enjoyable and can add to your skills – and its fun.'

To find out more about becoming a Union Learning Rep, contact your branch or regional office or Communitas on 01562 749170 (England), 01495 306329 (Wales) and 01698 304575 (Scotland).



Spanish tutor Ana Paula Pereira was on hand to help out with pronunciation.