

# Why Unionlearn matters

**Mick Whitley MP**

Mick Whitley was elected Labour MP for Birkenhead in 2019, following a long history as a union activist in the merchant navy and motor industry, and latterly as the North-West Regional Secretary for Unite. *PSE* is printing here Mick's contribution to the Westminster Debate of 18th November 2020 on the withdrawal of government funding for the Union Learning Fund to draw attention to an important - but frequently overlooked - element of adult education, union-enabled education for adult workers. The decision to withdraw the funding certainly illustrates the Government's inability to grasp the issues of educational access and the important role unions can play in adult education. The costs of the ULF are modest compared to other adult education funding and its success in engaging workers in learning are well-documented. The ULF should be extended not cut. The Government's motivation for withdrawing ULF funding is a petty ideological distaste for trade unions having any control over public money and indifference to working-class education. Working-class education is an issue of considerable concern to *PSE*. We are therefore inviting readers to take up the argument in Mick's contribution: how do we protect ULF funding and how do we extend this kind of union-based education beyond, say, the literacy, numeracy and digital skills that are the mainstay of ULF-related provision into broader kinds of 'social purpose' worker education?

I should first declare an interest: many of you will know by now that I am a life-long trade unionist and former Regional Secretary of Unite the Union. My experiences in the workplace over many years have given me an insider's view of how valuable the Union Learning Fund has been for so many workers.

Currently this fund supports a quarter of a million workers through the provision of first-class training and skills courses. The announcement by the Government last October that the fund will end in March 2021 flies in the face of the needs of the country as the pandemic rages.

That is why the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have opted to maintain it. As the virus tears apart our industries the need for resources to be put into rebuilding our skills base, retraining our workforce and providing people capable of taking up new jobs in new industries is obvious - at least to the devolved governments.

I must ask, why is this not obvious to the Conservative government? If they really believe we must build back better how can they also believe that taking away a key means of achieving this goal is a good idea?

It will not save them money, but it will cost them considerable rewards in terms of an educated workforce capable of meeting the challenge of the Green Industrial Revolution that must lie at the heart of rebuilding our economy.

Even now the ULF more than pays for itself, contributing an estimated £5.4 million pounds in terms of improved productivity. The Chancellor takes in an estimated £3.8 million extra in tax revenues - for every £1 it spends through the fund it takes in £3.57 extra per worker in taxes as a result of improved wages and in welfare savings as a result of people securing employment through the fund.

Not surprisingly many employers, including such as Tesco, Tata Steel and Heathrow to name some of the bigger ones, are supporting the Trade Union campaign to save the ULF. I warmly welcome this campaign and I strongly urge the Government to change course on this issue.

But as well as the big picture arguments about its economic value, I want to talk about its benefits from a human point of view. In my years as a trade union activist I have seen and dealt with many individuals. I

have had to support them personally as well as collectively.

The beauty of the ULF is that it gives properly trained and accredited Union Learning Reps the chance to help people directly in the workplaces. I have spoken to colleagues who have suffered a disability and panicked about their inability to carry on their job or those excluded from work as a result of their disability.

I have spoken to people who cannot read or write but find many ways to disguise this fact from their employer and their colleagues - either out of shame or out of fear that admitting the truth could get them sacked.

I have met people whose potential to advance in their work has been cruelly hampered by a lack of education or by being scared about learning new skills to deal with new technologies.

These are the people who often get lost when governments look at their balance sheets and decide to fund or cut resources. But these are the people who keep our vital industries going during this current emergency. These are the people who many of us stood on our doorsteps and clapped during the first lockdown. These are the people who will suffer if the ULF is abolished.

The ULF has rescued such people in the past. They have become literate and numerate thanks to it and have become more effective workers as a result. Their fears of change have been extinguished because the ULF enabled them to acquire new skills. They are people for whom ULF training has ensured that their disability is not an obstacle to work but a means of securing a job or adjusting to their role in work.

It is simple - from the point of view of educating the workforce of the future and supporting the workforce of today, the ULF is a precious resource. We must not give it up.



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