

## **Scottish Union Learning (STUC) Workplace ESOL**

### **STUC – background information**

The STUC represents over 655,000 trade unionists, the members of 37 affiliated trade unions and 22 Trades Union Councils. We speak for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace, in all occupational sectors and across Scotland. Our representative structures ensure that we can speak for the interests of women workers, black workers, young workers and other groups of trade unionists that otherwise suffer discrimination in the workplace and in society.

The purpose of the STUC is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the trade union movement in Scotland and to promote trade unionism, equality and social justice, the creation and maintenance of high quality jobs, and the public sector delivery of services.

*Scottish Union Learning*, which was launched in May 2008 and is funded by the Scottish Government, continues to develop the work of the previous STUC Skills and Lifelong Learning Team and works with unions, employers, government and a range of other bodies to help unions give workers access to learning and development opportunities. There is also a well established network of Union Learning Reps throughout Scotland, encouraging and supporting learners in the workplace.

### **ESOL – a trade union issue**

ESOL is a trade union issue because migrant workers who are unable to understand written and spoken English are severely disadvantaged in the workplace. Poor English language skills have an impact on pay and conditions – should employers use the lack of these skills as an opportunity to exploit workers, and this is compounded if they are working for an agency or gang master.

There are huge health and safety implications, particularly in the construction industry where (mostly) Eastern European workers have been recruited to fill labour shortages,

and where they have been unable to read health and safety notices, or understand spoken warnings, this has led to injuries, which have sometimes been fatal.

Lack of English language skills also prevents people from career progression, it hinders their interaction with colleagues, it can lead to misunderstandings, tension in the workplace, and even discrimination.

ESOL learning is therefore a positive step towards equality.

## **Examples of good practice in workplace ESOL:**

### **Communication Workers' Union (CWU)**

The Royal Mail Centre in Edinburgh has over 40 different nationalities working there, including Chinese, African, Polish and the Indian subcontinent. Through the Scottish Union Learning Fund (SULF), which is funding awarded to unions by the Scottish Government, the CWU established a learning centre on site, enabling staff to attend courses based around their shift patterns. An open day was organised to promote the various types of learning available and an ESOL Tutor from the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was invited along to talk about ESOL and gather information on demand. The WEA has since worked with the CWU to develop an ESOL course to meet the requirements of the learners, and incorporates elements of workplace terminology and the meanings of acronyms, abbreviations and much more.

Union learning reps in the Mail Centre believe that there will be a great demand for this type of course, due to the number of potential learners, the quality of the course, and the method of delivery by the WEA - on-site and shift-friendly.

### **Unite: T&G Section (Formerly Transport & General Workers' Union)**

The T&G has been delivering ESOL courses for Firstbus, which now has many Eastern European workers. These courses are delivered on site – in bus depots – and again are shift-friendly, catching workers either before or after their shifts.

Adam Smith College in Fife is the main learning provider, due to the historical relationship with the T&G, whereby all T&G learning is accredited through the college, and the college also trains lay tutors for the union. Some ESOL classes have, however, been delivered by the Renfrewshire and Glasgow Adult Literacies Partnerships.

The T&G has also been innovative in organising basic Polish classes for learning reps and other union members, to help them communicate more effectively with their Polish colleagues – I think this is also a great way of helping Scottish workers understand the language barriers faced by migrant workers.

Other unions have been promoting ESOL learning and are working to make workplaces more ESOL-friendly – by producing welcome posters in different languages, printing information and health and safety leaflets, and information on local services, leisure facilities and amenities. The responsibility, however, still remains with employers and there are difficulties in some workplaces where management doesn't appreciate the importance of good English language skills, and the benefits of releasing migrant workers to improve their skills.

I hope that by working with the ESOL National Panel and other partners, we can raise the profile of workplace ESOL, and build capacity to meet the demand for ESOL learning.

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