

# **Working with Dinosaurs? Union Effectiveness in Delivering for Employees**

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Policy Studies Institute

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# Working with Dinosaurs? Union Effectiveness in Delivering for Employees

*Alex Bryson\**

## Abstract

This paper considers the meaning of union effectiveness and identifies features of union structure and behaviour that are correlated with employee perceptions of union effectiveness in delivering improved work and working conditions. There are strong links between unions' organisational effectiveness and employee perceptions of whether they are effective in achieving fair pay, promoting equal opportunities, protecting workers, making work interesting and enjoyable, and working with management to increase quality and productivity.

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## 1. Introduction

Employees are instrumentalist in their decisions to join trade unions. The desire of non-members for membership, and members' satisfaction with representation by their union, are higher where the union is perceived as an effective organisation capable of delivering better terms and conditions for employees (Bryson, 2003). Within a consumer choice theory of union joining behaviour, higher union effectiveness implies higher returns to membership net of costs (Farber and Western, 2002). If the union is perceived as 'effective', employees are more likely to think they have something tangible to gain from membership, either in terms of better wages, better non-pecuniary terms of employment, or better insurance against arbitrary employer actions. Thus an increase in union effectiveness will increase the individual's propensity to purchase membership (or remain a member) by shifting the individual's perceptions of the benefits relative to the costs.

Of course, the relative returns to membership are not the only factor determining employees' union joining behaviour and union membership status. Other factors include social background (Charlwood, 2002), parental influence (Blanden and Machin, 2002), demographic characteristics like age (Bryson et al., 2001), job characteristics and satisfaction with one's job and working environment (Farber and Saks, 1980), employer characteristics, including employer attitudes to unionisation (Bryson, 2003), the availability of other voice mechanisms at the workplace (Bryson, 2003), and the joining decisions of others in the same workplace (Bryson and Gomez, 2002a). However, the role of union effectiveness has attracted less attention than these other factors. There is little research on what makes unions effective in the eyes of employees. This is surprising since, at a time of declining membership, declining union density, and rising never-membership (Bryson and Gomez, 2002b) unions have a clear interest in identifying practical measures by which they can improve recruitment and retention of union members. Increasing employee perceptions of union effectiveness is one such method.

This paper distinguishes between two types of union effectiveness. First, organisational effectiveness, a term used to encapsulate those factors which give a union the capacity to represent its members by virtue of its 'healthy' state as an organisation. The second type of effectiveness is unions' ability to 'deliver' for employees in improving work and working conditions. Together, these two types of effectiveness signal a union that is effective in representing its membership.

The paper considers the meaning of union effectiveness and identifies features of union structure and behaviour that are correlated with employee perceptions of union effectiveness in 'delivering' for employees. Organisational effectiveness may feed through to improved delivery of outcomes and success in delivering for employees may encourage non-members to join, providing a sound basis for improved organisational effectiveness. The analysis presented does not attempt to identify the direction of causation, but simply points to a clear, significant relationship between the two.

After reviewing some recent evidence on union effectiveness, the paper introduces seven dimensions of organisational effectiveness, namely:

- unions' ability to communicate and share information
- usefulness of unions as a source of information and advice
- unions' openness and accountability to members
- union responsiveness to members' problems and complaints
- how seriously management have to take the union

- union understanding of the employer's business
- the power of the union.

The paper goes on to assess unions' ability to 'deliver' improvements in work and the working environment in seven areas:

- getting pay increases
- offering protection against unfair treatment
- promotion of equal opportunities
- making work interesting and enjoyable
- working with management for improved performance
- increasing managerial responsiveness to employees
- making the workplace a better place to work.

Then the incidence of union practices and conditions conducive to union effectiveness is discussed to establish the nature of the organisational challenge facing unions in their efforts to improve their effectiveness. The conclusions focus on the implications for the future of trade unions in Britain.

## 2. Recent evidence on union effectiveness

The discussion above begs the question: does the decline in union density since the early 1980s reflect a downward shift in employee perceptions of union effectiveness? Certainly there is some evidence of a decline in employee desire for unionisation. Most of the decline in union density during the 1990s was due to declining membership within unionised workplaces (Millward *et al.*, 2000). The main reason for this trend cited by managerial respondents to the *Workplace Industrial Relations Survey* was "a decline in employee support for their union" (Millward *et al.*, 2000: 92). But this trend may be unrelated to union effectiveness, reflecting instead rising costs of membership, such as increased employer opposition to unionisation. However, around 10 percentage points of the 12–13 percentage point decline in mean union density in unionised workplaces between 1990 and 1998 "can be attributed to a reduced propensity among employees to join trade unions, even when encouraged to do so [by management]" (Millward *et al.* 2000: 149–151). In any event, declining density and bargaining coverage where unions continue to operate implies real difficulties in unions remaining organisationally effective and, since research shows the importance of union density and bargaining coverage in being able to deliver benefits such as higher wages (Bryson, 2002; Forth and Millward, 2002), this implies a reduced capacity to deliver better terms and conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Difficulties in assessing changes in union effectiveness in delivering for employees arise because so many of the benefits which unionisation confers – such as procedural justice and the establishment of family-friendly policies – are not easily measured. There are indications, nevertheless, that unions continue to be successful in encouraging employers to adopt and maintain such procedures (Fernie and Gray, 2002). However, unions have been slow to point to these successes, so that these gains have yet to translate into perceived

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<sup>1</sup> The North American literature on union effectiveness points to a similar interplay between unions' organisational health and their effectiveness in attaining bargaining and political goals (Rose and Chaison, 1996).

benefits arising from effective union action. Similarly, although unions continue to operate as a ‘sword of justice’, tackling pay inequality, pay discrimination and low pay by altering procedures governing the contract of employment, and challenging the way employers set pay (Metcalf et al., 2001), there is a general perception that unions are too weak to achieve these aims, so that few credit unions with these achievements.

There are two measures of the benefits of union membership over time which do help gauge how effective unions have been in improving terms and conditions for employees. The first is the union membership wage premium. This arises because unions bargain on members’ behalf for wages that are above the market rate. Recent empirical evidence points to a premium which is significantly lower than the 10 per cent so typical in earlier studies (Booth and Bryan, 2001; Bryson, 2002; Machin, 2001). However, analyses using consistent data and methods over time suggest this may be a counter-cyclical effect, as opposed to a secular decline (Blanchflower and Bryson, 2003; Bryson and Gomez, 2002b). The recent decline began with the economic up-turn in the mid-1990s, so it cannot account for declining density in the period since 1980.

The second measure relates to employees’ evaluation of how well unions do their job. In all years since 1983, except 1995 and 1997, all employee respondents to the British Social Attitudes Surveys in unionised workplaces have been asked:

*On the whole, do you think the union(s)/staff association(s) in your workplace do(es) their job well or not?*

**Table 1: Employee perceptions of how well unions do their job in unionised workplaces, 1983–1985 to 1999–2001**

	Year, grouped				
	1983–1985	1986–1989	1990–1994	1995–1998	1999–2001
% who say unions do their job well	59	60	58	61	62
% who say unions do <u>not</u> do their job well	37	35	36	32	31
<i>Base</i>	<i>1574</i>	<i>2671</i>	<i>2880</i>	<i>1478</i>	<i>2094</i>

Table 1 shows that those saying ‘yes’ has remained fairly static at around six in ten employees. It seems that, where employees have the opportunity to experience unions first hand, the experience is generally positive. Among members, the figure was 63 per cent in 1983–1985 and 65 per cent in 1999–2001, indicating that close to two-thirds of union members are satisfied with the service they receive.

This slim evidence suggests two things. First, although unions have been less effective recently in procuring a wage premium for their members, this may be a cyclical issue and, in any case, its timing cannot explain the decline in union density since 1980. Further, unions continue to compress the wage distribution, benefiting the lower paid and those facing discrimination. Second, on the broader issue of whether unions are thought to do their job well, union effectiveness has remained fairly constant over the last two decades.

### 3. Dimensions of union organisational effectiveness

This section identifies dimensions of union organisational effectiveness, as perceived by employees. The analyses draw on data from three sources – the British Worker Representation and Participation Survey 2001 (BWRPS), the British Social Attitudes Survey 1998 (BSA) and the Workplace Employee Relations Survey 1998 (WERS) – which are described in the data appendix. Throughout distinctions are made between current members, ex-members and those who have never joined a union (‘never-members’).

*Unions’ ability to communicate and share information:* According to BWRPS, under half the employees in unionised workplaces in 2001 thought the union was either ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ at sharing the information it had about the employer and the workplace. Union members were more positive about the unions’ role than non-members, with ex-members most critical of union information-sharing (Table 2).

**Table 2: % employees thinking union is excellent or good at sharing information**

All employees	Current members	Ex-members	Never-members
46	53	31	37

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

Worker representatives improve the effectiveness of unions in sharing information: employees’ evaluation of the union’s information sharing role is more positive the more contact they have with union representatives, with elected representatives proving most effective (Table 3). Although there has been much discussion about the potential of web-based services (Diamond and Freeman, 2001a), only a fifth (21%) of employees in unionised workplaces visit the union’s website. Of these, half rate the website as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.

Unions are more effective at sharing information where employees think they have about the right amount of power, and where employees think they receive support from the employer.

**Table 3: % employees thinking union is excellent or good at sharing information**

Contact with worker representative:	
Frequent	60
Occasional	48
Never	34
Type of union representative:	
Elected	50
Chosen by union leadership	47
Volunteer	44
Power of the union:	
About right	59
Too little	34
Employer attitude to the union:	
In favour	60
Neutral	38
Opposed	30

Notes:



- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

*Usefulness of the union as a source of information and advice:* Employees do not regard the union as a valuable source of information about their employer. They are much more likely to turn to their manager or supervisor, to printed material or friends and work colleagues (Table 4). This situation changes little with employees' membership status or the nature of union representation.

**Table 4: % employees saying source has most useful information about employer**

Manager/supervisor	Noticeboard/newsletter	Friends/work colleagues	Union	Media/other
34	34	18	4	9

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join.

However, along with the manager/supervisor, unions are the most common place that employees turn to when in need of advice on their rights at work (Table 5). This is the case when employees are asked a hypothetical question about who they would turn to, and when the question is directed at what victims of unfair treatment actually decide to do (Diamond and Freeman, 2001b). Those turning to the union for rights advice include one-quarter of those citing their manager or supervisor as the most useful source of information about the employer, indicating that a sizeable percentage of employees trust the union over management when it comes to this sensitive subject.

**Table 5: who you turn to first for advice on rights at work**

Manager/supervisor	Union	Friends/work colleagues	Citizens' Bureaux	Advice	Other
33	32	24	6		5

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

Rights advice seems to be targeted at current members: they are three times more likely than ex-members to turn to the union for advice on rights at work. Even so, half of members do not say they would turn to the union first: these included one-quarter citing their manager or supervisor and one-sixth who mentioned work colleagues. A mere 2% of never-members say they turn to the union first.

The likelihood of using the union as a source of rights advice is higher where employees have contact with a worker representative, and where that representative is elected by employees (Table 6). Whereas employees view unions as a more useful source of information on the employer where the union's position is secure – that is, where they are thought to have the right amount of power in the workplace, and where they have employer support – employees are more likely to turn to the union for rights advice where the union's organisational position is weaker.

**Table 6: % employees turning to union first for rights advice**

Union membership status:	
Current member	47
Ex-member	15
Never member	2
Contact with worker representative:	
Frequent	59
Occasional	35
Never	10
Type of union representative:	
Elected	40
Chosen by union leadership	34
Volunteer	27
Power of the union:	
About right	29
Too little	39
Employer attitude to the union:	
In favour	35
Neutral	29
Opposed	42

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

*Unions' openness and accountability to members:* Around half of all employees in unionised workplaces say union openness and accountability to members is either 'excellent' or 'good' (Table 7). This rises with closer acquaintance with the union, either in terms of membership or contact with worker representatives. Unions seem more open and accountable where they have sufficient power at the workplace, and where they receive employer support. Democratic structures, as indicated by the election of union representatives, are also conducive to employee perceptions of union openness and accountability.

**Table 7: % employees saying union openness and accountability to members is 'excellent' or 'good'**

Union membership status:	
All employees	53
Current member	62
Ex-member	40
Never member	41
Contact with worker representative:	
Frequent	63
Occasional	61
Never	37
Type of union representative:	
Elected	59
Chosen by union leadership	41
Volunteer	51
Power of the union:	

About right	65
Too little	45
Employer attitude to the union:	
In favour	65
Neutral	45
Opposed	43

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

*Union responsiveness to members' problems and complaints:* Around seven-in-ten employees think unions 'take notice of members' problems and complaints' (Table 8). Ex-members are less likely than never-members to agree with this statement, perhaps suggesting that a lack of responsiveness on the part of the union may have contributed to their departure from the union.

**Table 8: % employees agreeing unions at their workplace take notice of members' problems and complaints**

	All employees	Current members	Ex-members	Never-members
WERS	66	72	52	58
BSAS	72	79	60	64

Notes:

- a. Source for row 1: WERS 1998, covering all employees in workplaces with 10+ employees where employee says there is a union on-site.
- b. Source for row 2: BSAS 1998, covering all employees working 10+ hours per week where employee says there is a union on-site.

Members' perceptions of unions' responsiveness to their problems and complaints rises with on-site representation - particularly by a full-time representative - and with the extent of contact members have with their representative (Table 9). Union recognition is of little consequence in this regard unless the union has a representative on-site. The union is more able to respond where there are more representatives and where the representative-to-employee ratio is lower. Responsiveness rises with the perceived power of the union and with union density - further evidence of the link between effectiveness and the union's organisational strength on the ground. Bargaining structures and bargaining coverage are also important: members perceive unions as more responsive where their terms and conditions are subject to collective bargaining and where that bargaining occurs at the workplace. Employer support for unions is also associated with unions being more responsive, perhaps because supportive employers offer the facilities and time that representatives need to function effectively.

**Table 9: % members who 'agree' or 'agree strongly' that the union takes notice of members' problems and complaints**

Recognition:	
Union, but not recognised	69
Union recognised, no reps	65
Union recognised, external rep only	68
Union recognised, with on-site rep	72
Union recognised, with full-time on-site rep	74

Contact with union representative:	
Frequent	87
Occasional	72
Never	57
Don't know of a representative	43
Number of recognised unions:	
1	70
2	69
3+	72
Number of union reps in recognised workplace:	
1	69
2	68
3+	73
On-site rep covering:	
<50 employees	74
50+ employees	70
Power of the union:	
About right	85
Too little	76
Union density:	
1-24%	66
25-49%	69
50-74%	72
75-99%	73
100%	75
Member's pay set through collective bargaining	
Yes	72
No	65
Locus of collective bargaining:	
Workplace	75
Organisation	74
Industry	68
Employer attitude to union membership:	
In favour	73
Neutral	67
Opposed	69
Employee perceptions of employer attitudes towards trade unions:	
In favour	82
Neutral	66
Not in favour	66

Notes:

- a. Source: WERS 1998, apart from 'power of the union' analysis which uses BSAS 1998.
- b. Based on all union member employees working in workplaces with 10+ employees where employee says there is a union on-site. 'Power of the union' analysis based on all employees working 10+ hours who are union members

*The seriousness with which management treats the union.* The seriousness with which employees think management takes the union reflects the union's organisational strength, as

indicated by recognition, the presence of on-site representation, union density and union power. Bargaining coverage is of little consequence, but the locus of bargaining makes a difference. Where bargaining occurs at industry-level unions seem to be taken more seriously than where bargaining occurs at organisation or workplace-level, perhaps because sectoral bargaining only continues to exist in traditional union strongholds.

**Table 10: % employees agreeing unions at their workplace are taken seriously by management**

	All employees	Current members	Ex-members	Never-members
WERS	45	49	36	38
BSAS	52	56	48	44

Notes:

- Source for row 1: WERS 1998, covering all employees in workplaces with 10+ employees where employee says there is a union on-site.
- Source for row 2: BSAS 1998, covering all employees working 10+ hours per week where employee says there is a union on-site. BSAS figures are % disagreeing with the statement that 'union(s) at your workplace are/is usually ignored by management'

Although there is an association between positive employer attitudes to unionisation and the seriousness with which management takes the union, it is by no means as strong when using employers' actual support for unionisation instead of employees' perception of that support. Furthermore, a quarter of employees in unionised workplaces who think the employer opposes unionisation also think the employer takes the union seriously. The figure is even higher (42%) when characterising employer opposition using what the employer says. These are likely to be workplaces where the union is particularly strong, and therefore able to demand the serious attention of management, even though management is loathe to give it.

**Table 11: Variation in % employees who 'agree' or 'agree strongly' that the union is taken seriously by management**

Recognition:	
Union not recognised	37
Union recognised, no reps	40
Union recognised, external rep only	43
Union recognised, with on-site rep	45
Union recognised, with full-time on-site rep	52
Contact with union representative:	
Frequent	61
Occasional	48
Never	40
Don't know of a representative	25
Number of recognised unions:	
1	42
2	44
3+	48
Number of union reps in recognised workplace:	
1	43
2	42
3+	46

On-site rep covering: <50 employees	48
50+ employees	44
Power of the union: About right	66
Too little	44
Union density: 1-24%	34
25-49%	44
50-74%	45
75-99%	50
100%	53
Member's pay set through collective bargaining Yes	50
No	47
Locus of collective bargaining: Workplace	47
Organisation	48
Industry	53
Employer attitude to union membership: In favour	47
Neutral	40
Opposed	42
Employee perceptions of employer attitudes towards trade unions: In favour	72
Neutral	39
Not in favour	24

Notes:

- Source: WERS 1998, apart from 'power of the union' analysis which uses BSAS 1998.
- Based on all employees working in workplaces with 10+ employees where employee says there is a union on-site. 'Power of the union' analysis based on all employees working 10+ hours per week.

*Unions' understanding and knowledge of the employer's business:* Six-in-ten (61%) employees in unionised workplaces believe that the union's 'understanding and knowledge of the employer's business' is either 'excellent' or 'good' (Table 12). Belief in the union's understanding of the employer's business rises with exposure to the union, whether as a member or through contact with union representatives. The more favourable the employer is towards the union, the more the union gets to know about the employer. But vibrant unions using elections to choose their representatives and unions with power at the workplace are also adept at getting to know their employer's business.

**Table 12: Variation in % employees saying union understanding and knowledge of the employer's business is 'excellent' or 'good'**

Union membership status: All employees	61
Current member	66
Ex-member	48

Never member	53
Contact with worker representative:	
Frequent	66
Occasional	68
Never	48
Type of union representative:	
Elected	68
Chosen by union leadership	59
Volunteer	56
Power of the union:	
About right	71
Too little	50
Employer attitude to the union:	
In favour	72
Neutral	59
Opposed	42

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. All employees at workplaces with a union they can join

*The power of the union:* Unions' influence in the workplace derives, in large part, from their bargaining power, stemming from their ability to disrupt the supply of labour in pursuance of their members' interests. But it also comes from the union's role as the representative 'voice' of employees in the resolution of workplace grievances and disputes (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). Both sources of influence depend on the credibility of the union in claiming to represent the workforce. This has diminished since the 1980s because, even where unions continue to be recognised for bargaining purposes, there has been a decline in the proportion of employees whose terms and conditions are set by collective bargaining and the proportion who are union members (Millward *et al.*, 2000). These trends are reflected in employees' perceptions of a decline in union power between 1989 and 1998. However, by 2001, their power appears to have returned to its level in the late 1980s.

**Table 14: Union power at the workplace, 1989-2001 (% employees)**

	1989	1998	2001
Far too much	<1	<1	1
Too much	4	2	3
About right	52	45	53
Too little	32	40	33
Far too little	6	7	6
Don't know	6	5	4

Notes:

- a. Source: BSAS for 1989 and 1998, BWRPS for 2001. BSAS question is: 'Do you think that the (trade unions/staff association/trade unions or staff association) at your workplace (has/have) too much or too little power?' BWRPS question is: 'Do you think the union in your workplace has too much or too little power?'
- b. For comparability with BSAS, BWRPS analysis confined to employees working 10+ hours per week in workplaces with a recognised union.

Employees make a conscious link between union strength and unions' ability to deliver for employees, with 70% of respondents to BWRPS believing 'strong unions are needed to protect the working conditions and wages of employees'.

*Summary:* This section has shown employees are able to discriminate across different dimensions of union organisational effectiveness, with employee ratings ranging quite widely according to the issue addressed in the survey question. Higher ratings are correlated with union strength (union density, the presence of on-site representatives), more 'powerful' unions, positive employer attitudes to unionisation, democratic union structures, bargaining coverage and the locus of bargaining. With the exception of unions as a source of information about the employer, where ratings are low, and taking notice of members' problems and complaints, where ratings are fairly high, between four-in-ten to six-in-ten rate the union at their workplace as 'excellent' or 'good' on most dimensions. Whether unions should take comfort in this, or treat it as a cause for concern, depends on their aspirations but, if these were satisfaction ratings for a commercial company the company would be investigating what is going wrong.

#### **4. Unions' ability to 'deliver'**

Section Three identified characteristics of unions associated with organisational effectiveness. This section considers which aspects of union organisational efficiency are associated with improvements in employees' work and their working environment. Regression techniques isolate the independent associations between union organisational effectiveness and perceptions of unions' effectiveness in improving work and working conditions having controlled for a wide range of other variables.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the union structure and behaviour measures were introduced in Section 3. In addition, because the union measures are quite highly correlated, factor analysis was used in the BWRPS analyses to explore the possibility that the data are measuring one or more underlying common factors with item-specific measurement error. Two factors emerged from this analysis (described in the technical appendix). The first labelled 'ORGEFF' corresponds with how effective the union is as an organisation. The second, 'DELIVER', identifies union effectiveness in delivering improved conditions.

*Winning fair pay increases and bonuses:* As noted in Section Two, the union wage premium is one way of measuring the value of union membership to employees. Just how important the issue of setting pay and related bonuses is to employees relative to issues such as job protection varies with the business cycle (Bryson and McKay, 1997: 37) but, in 2001, the BWRPS indicates that 61% of employees in unionised workplaces thought 'setting pay, bonuses or perks' was a 'very important' priority for unions, and another 31% considered it 'important'. Union members attach higher priority to it than non-members, with 69% viewing it as 'very important'. Asked to evaluate unions' performance in 'winning fair pay increases and bonuses', only 40% of employees in unionised workplaces rate them as 'excellent' or 'good', as do union members in those workplaces. This matters to employees: where the union is rated as 'excellent' or 'good', the percentage of employees in BWRPS

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<sup>2</sup> The regression techniques are explained in the footnote to each table. The control variables used, also detailed in table footnotes, relate to individuals' demographic characteristics, their jobs, their employers, geographical location and membership status.



who agree that workers at their workplace 'are being paid unfair wages' is half that in workplaces where the union is rated as 'fair', 'poor' or 'a failure' (12% instead of 25%). So, what makes a union effective in winning fair pay increases?

Controlling for a range of personal, job and workplace characteristics, multivariate analyses isolate the independent associations between aspects of union structure and behaviour and their ability to win fair pay increases and bonuses. Table 14 shows the percentage change in the likelihood of a union being rated 'excellent' or 'good' at winning fair pay increases and bonuses with changes in the characteristics and behaviour of the union. The table presents results for separate models, each containing a single union feature. They indicate that unions' ability to win fair pay increases is associated with most of the factors identified in the earlier discussion. For instance, row 2 shows that the likelihood of a union being 'excellent' or 'good' at winning fair pay is 21% higher where the union is recognised by the employer for pay bargaining. The presence and use of union representatives is significant. The effectiveness of the union is greater where union representatives are elected and where employees are in frequent contact with them. (Although contact with representatives is not significant when distinguishing between 'frequent' contact and all other scenarios, 'frequent' contact is significant relative to having no contact at all.) Employees do not think that union effectiveness at winning fair pay increases comes at the expense of good relations with management. Indeed, employees view good relations with management as conducive to pay bargaining effectiveness. Where there is a co-operative relationship in which unions and employers work together, the union works with the employer to improve quality and productivity, and where the employer supports the union, the union is perceived by employees to be more effective in winning pay increases. However, the union can only collaborate with the employer from a position of strength: where the union has 'too little power' the likelihood of being 'excellent' or 'good' at winning fair pay increases drops by 25%. Unions that deal well with employees and members – in terms of their openness and accountability and sharing information - are also thought to be the most effective at pay bargaining. Effectiveness in delivering improvements in other aspects of employees' working lives – protection against unfair treatment, making work more interesting and enjoyable, and promoting equal opportunities – is also an indication that the union is good at pay bargaining. Finally, unions that understand the employer's business are also better negotiators.

The analysis reported in the last row, where the organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness measures are incorporated alongside other aspects of union structure and behaviour, confirm that both types of effectiveness are highly correlated with the ability to deliver fair pay.

This analysis indicates the nature of the challenge facing unions. To be effective at pay bargaining, unions must foster relations with the employer, get to know the employer's business, cultivate relations with employees, ensuring openness and accessibility, have the representative structures in place on the ground, prove effective in delivering on other fronts, and operate from a position of relative power. It is not an 'either/or' situation for unions. They are either competent on all fronts, or else their ability to deliver fair pay increases is compromised.

**Table 15: Union effectiveness in winning fair pay increases**

Union membership status (ref: never-member):	
Current member	15**
Ex-member	-22*
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	21*
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don't know rep):	
Frequent	8
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep):	
Elected	10*
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right):	
Too little	-25**
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	
In favour	18**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree):	
Management/union work together	23**
Union understanding and knowledge of employer's business (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	39**
Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure)	
Union accountability is excellent or good	43**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at sharing information	56**
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at promoting equal opportunities	38**
Working with management to increase quality/productivity (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at working with management to increase productivity	45**
Making work interesting and enjoyable (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at making work interesting and enjoyable	42**
Protecting workers against unfair treatment (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at protecting workers against unfair treatment	45**
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources)	
Union	5
ORGEFF	34**
DELIVER	21**

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. Dependent variable is whether union excellent/good at 'winning fair pay increases and bonuses'. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 597) for union-related variables entered separately. Last row reports impact of organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness scales, with other union-related measures (management attitudes, election of union representatives, and so on) entered alongside other controls.
- c. The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of the union scoring 'excellent' or 'good' holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of the union being 'excellent' or 'good' is predicted to be 35%-38% depending on the model specification. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- d. Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

*Protecting workers against unfair treatment:* A staggering 85% of employees in unionised workplaces believe 'protecting workers against unfair treatment' is a 'very important' priority for unions, with another 13% saying it is 'quite important'. Nine-in-ten union members regard protection as 'very important' compared with three-quarters of non-members.

Unions seem to perform better at this task than they do at pay bargaining: 21% of employees rate unions as ‘excellent’ in this role, with another 42% rating them ‘good’. Members are even more positive, with 25% rating them ‘excellent’ and 45% rating them ‘good’.

The impact of union effectiveness in protecting workers from unfair treatment is illustrated in Table 16. It shows the percentage of employees in unionised workplaces identifying unfair treatment as an issue at their workplace. The percentage of employees citing unfair disciplining or dismissal, or bullying, as a problem at their workplace falls by roughly half where the union is perceived as effective in protecting workers.

**Table 16: % employees identifying unfair treatment as an issue at their workplace**

	Union ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ at protecting workers	Union ‘fair’ to ‘failure’ at protecting workers
Workers disciplined/dismissed unfairly	9	17
Preferential treatment by management/senior staff	20	24
Bullying by management or fellow workers	10	17
Sexual or racial discrimination	4	3

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. Figures are % employees in unionised workplaces saying the problem is an issue at their workplace.

When entered separately into the model, most union practices and behaviour are significantly associated with union effectiveness in protecting workers, with the size and direction of effects not dissimilar to the analysis of unions’ effectiveness in winning fair pay increases. Entering all union items together, ORGEFF and DELIVER are both highly significant. With these two scales present, members continue to have a higher estimation of unions’ ability to protect employees than non-members, and the perception that unions are effective in this is heightened where the employer is thought to be favourable to unionisation.

**Table 17: Union effectiveness in protecting workers**

Union membership status (ref: never-member):	
Current member	29**
Ex-member	-8
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	13
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don’t know rep):	
Frequent	4
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep):	
Elected	16**
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right):	
Too little	-22**
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	
In favour	23**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree):	

Management/union work together	21**
Union understanding and knowledge of employer's business (ref.: fair to failure) Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	45**
Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure) Union accountability is excellent or good	52**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at sharing information	43**
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at promoting equal opportunities	46**
Working with management to increase quality/productivity (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at working with management to increase productivity	44**
Making work interesting and enjoyable (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at making work interesting and enjoyable	33**
Winning fair pay increases and bonuses (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	43**
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources) Union	9
ORGEFF	22**
DELIVER	29**

Notes:

- Source: BWRPS 2001
- Dependent variable is whether union excellent/good at 'protecting workers against unfair treatment'. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 597) for union-related variables entered separately. Last row reports impact of organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness scales (reliability coefficients of .79 in both cases), with other union-related measures (management attitudes, election of union representatives, and so on) entered alongside other controls.
- The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of the union scoring 'excellent' or 'good' holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of the union being 'excellent' or 'good' is predicted to be 66%-75% depending on the model specification. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

*Promotion of equal opportunities:* Two-thirds (68%) of employees in unionised workplaces think the promotion of equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities is a 'very important' priority for unions, with a further 26% saying it is 'quite important'. Six-in-ten (62%) employees in unionised workplaces think unions are either 'excellent' or 'good' in performing this role.

**Table 18: Union effectiveness in promoting equal opportunities**

Union membership status (ref: never-member): Current member	24**
Ex-member	-7
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	28**
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don't know rep): Frequent	19**
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep): Elected	18**
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right): Too little	-17**
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	

In favour	19**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree): Management/union work together	20**
Union understanding and knowledge of employer's business (ref.: fair to failure) Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	35**
Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure) Union accountability is excellent or good	42**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at sharing information	40**
Protecting workers against unfair treatment (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at protecting workers against unfair treatment	46**
Working with management to increase quality/productivity (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at working with management to increase productivity	36**
Making work interesting and enjoyable (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at making work interesting and enjoyable	37**
Winning fair pay increases and bonuses (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	37**
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources) Union	14*
ORGEFF	20**
DELIVER	18**

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- e. Dependent variable is whether union excellent/good at 'promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities'. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 597) for union-related variables entered separately. Last row reports impact of organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness scales (reliability coefficients of .79 and .81 respectively), with other union-related measures (management attitudes, election of union representatives, and so on) entered alongside other controls.
- b. The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of the union scoring 'excellent' or 'good' holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of the union being 'excellent' or 'good' is predicted to be between 64% and 68% depending on the model specification \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- c. Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

The pattern of results for each union attribute entered separately is similar to analyses presented above for protection against unfair treatment. However, there are three exceptions. First, there is a positive association between effectiveness in promoting equal opportunities and union recognition, perhaps because formal bargaining rights are a means by which unions can focus employer attention on equal opportunities issues. Second, effectiveness in promoting equal opportunities is associated with frequent contact with a union representative on-site. Third, the union is viewed as more effective if it is also thought of as the first place to turn to for rights advice. These last two findings indicate the importance of union organisation on the ground for the active promotion of equal opportunities issues. In the final model, presented in the last row, ORGEFF and DELIVER have large, significant effects. They dominate other union effects, all of which (union membership status, type of on-site representation, contact with reps, union power, partnership with the employer, going to the union first for advice) become statistically non-significant. This might indicate that these other aspects of unionisation have their influence through their impact on unions' effectiveness organisationally or in 'delivering'.

*Making work interesting and enjoyable.* A minority of employees (40%) in unionised workplaces think ‘making work interesting and enjoyable’ is a ‘very important’ issue for the union at their workplace, making it quite a low priority for unions in the eyes of employees. Although unions are often involved in job redesign and employee involvement schemes, both of which have the potential to make work more interesting and enjoyable, it has not traditionally been a core objective for unions. Perhaps because of this few rate unions’ efforts to make work more interesting and enjoyable very highly: only 5% say the union is ‘excellent’ at doing this, with another 21% saying it is ‘good’. This differs little across members and non-members.

When entered separately into the model, most aspects of union structure and behaviour seem to be associated with making work interesting and enjoyable, the exceptions being union recognition, frequency of contact with a representative, and the union being the first resort for rights advice. The biggest effect is associated with the union being ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ at working with the employer to improve quality and productivity. This raises the likelihood of the union being ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ at making work interesting and enjoyable by 41%. It may be that this activity offers unions the opportunity to assist in job redesign and work reorganisation in such a way as to improve the quality of employees’ working life while achieving productivity improvements. Being effective in promoting equal opportunities is also associated with union effectiveness in making work interesting and enjoyable. Perhaps equal opportunities policies allow employees to fulfil their potential in the workplace? Unions must be powerful to be effective in making work interesting and enjoyable, presumably because they need to persuade employers to make changes to working arrangements that they might not make in the absence of a union. It is not immediately obvious why openness and accountability of the union, and its preparedness to share information with employees, should be associated with effectiveness in making work interesting and enjoyable. One possibility is that a well-run and responsive union is one part of an enjoyable and more interesting working environment, offering employees an opportunity for involvement in consultation and decision-making processes which might otherwise be absent. Once again, the ORGEFF and DELIVER scales are strong and significant, and union effects on other dimensions become statistically non-significant.

**Table 19: Union effectiveness in making work interesting and enjoyable**

Union membership status (ref: never-member):	
Current member	5
Ex-member	-7
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	9
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don’t know rep):	
Frequent	8
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep):	
Elected	12**
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right):	
Too little	-17**
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	
In favour	17**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree):	
Management/union work together	15**
Union understanding and knowledge of employer’s business (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	23**

Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure) Union accountability is excellent or good	31**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at sharing information	36**
Protecting workers against unfair treatment (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at protecting workers against unfair treatment	26**
Working with management to increase quality/productivity (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at working with management to increase productivity	41**
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at promoting equal opportunities	28**
Winning fair pay increases and bonuses (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	31**
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources) Union	4
ORGEFF	8**
DELIVER	18**

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. Dependent variable is whether union excellent/good at ‘making work interesting and enjoyable’. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 592) for union-related variables entered separately. Last row reports impact of organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness scales (reliability coefficients of .79 and .81 respectively), with other union-related measures (management attitudes, election of union representatives, and so on) entered alongside other controls.
- c. The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of the union scoring ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of the union being ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ is predicted to be between 10% and 21% depending on the model specification. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- d. Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

*Working with management for improved performance:* Fifty-eight per cent of employees in unionised workplaces think working with management to improve quality or productivity is a ‘very important’ issue for the union at their workplace, with a further 33% saying it is ‘quite important’. But ratings of unions’ ability to work with managers to this end are poor: only 9% rate unions as ‘excellent’ and 35% rate them as ‘good’. There is a clear pay-off to employees. Where employees think unions are ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ in this respect, the likelihood that employees’ suggestions for improving quality or productivity are taken seriously by management almost double, from 24% where the union is not rated ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ to 42%.

With the exception of frequency of contact with the union representative on-site, all union practices are significantly associated with union effectiveness in working with management to increase productivity when entered separately into the model. But again, the positive effects of ORGEFF and DELIVER dominate the other union effects when they are entered together.

**Table 20: Union effectiveness in working with management to increase quality or productivity**

Union membership status (ref: never-member):	
Current member	17**
Ex-member	-19
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	24**
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don't know rep):	
Frequent	7
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep):	
Elected	17**
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right):	
Too little	-17**
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	
In favour	25**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree):	
Management/union work together	23**
Union understanding and knowledge of employer's business (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	50**
Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure)	
Union accountability is excellent or good	47**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at sharing information	54**
Protecting workers against unfair treatment (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at protecting workers against unfair treatment	49**
Making work interesting and enjoyable (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at making work interesting and enjoyable	57**
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at promoting equal opportunities	28**
Winning fair pay increases and bonuses (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	46**
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources)	
Union	13*
ORGEFF	34**
DELIVER	41**

Notes:

- Source: BWRPS 2001
- Dependent variable is whether union excellent/good at 'working with management to increase quality and productivity'. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 597) for union-related variables entered separately. Last row reports impact of organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness scales (reliability coefficients of .79 and .81 respectively), with other union-related measures (management attitudes, election of union representatives, and so on) entered alongside other controls.
- The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of the union scoring 'excellent' or 'good' holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of the union being 'excellent' or 'good' is predicted to be between 37% and 44% depending on the model specification. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

*Increasing managerial responsiveness to employees:* Another sign of an effective union is its ability to improve employees' working environment by encouraging employers to be more responsive to employees' needs than they might have been in the absence of a union. WERS



1998 asks employees to rate, on a five-point scale from ‘very good’ to ‘very poor’, how good managers at their workplace are on five items:

- Keeping people up to date about proposed changes
- Providing everyone with the chance to comment on proposed changes
- Responding to suggestions from employees
- Dealing with work problems you or others may have
- Treating employees fairly.

The items were rescaled and combined to produce a single index of managerial responsiveness running from –10 (‘very poor’) to +10 (‘very good’). Half the employees working in unionised workplaces score 1 or more on this scale. The analysis here identifies aspects of unionisation associated with being in the top half of this distribution (scoring between 1 and 10).

**Table 21: Union effectiveness in increasing managerial responsiveness**

Union membership status (ref.: current-member):	
Ex-member	+2
Never-member	+6**
Arrangements for union membership (ref.: union recognised, no management recommendation or closed shop)	
Management strongly recommends union membership	+8**
Closed shop	+3
Employee perceptions of management attitudes to trade unions (ref.: neutral)	
In favour	+20**
Not in favour	-28**
Employer attitudes to trade union membership (ref.: neutral)	
In favour	+1
Not in favour	+6
Not an issue	+6
Employer would rather consult directly with employees than with unions (ref.: neither agree nor disagree):	
Strongly agree	+4
Agree	-2
Disagree	-3
Strongly disagree	-2
Union is ‘taken seriously by management’ (ref.: neither agree nor disagree)	
Strongly agree	+30**
Agree	+23**
Disagree	-22**
Strongly disagree	-41**
Union ‘takes notice of members’ problems and complaints’ (ref.: neither agree nor disagree)	
Strongly agree	+18**
Agree	+10**
Disagree	-19**
Strongly disagree	-36**

Notes:

- a. Source: WERS 1998
- b. Dependent variable is (0,1), employee scoring 1 where scored 1 or more on managerial responsiveness scale. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees who say there is a union or staff association at their workplace (N ranges from 11447 to 10989) for union-related variables entered separately. The marginal effects reported are the percentage change in the probability of scoring 1 or more

on the responsiveness scale holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of managerial responsiveness under the model is 50%. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.

- c. Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, academic and vocational qualifications, occupation, hours worked, workplace tenure, if permanent contract, gross wages, establishment size, number of occupations at the workplace, % female, % managers who are female, % part-timers, % ethnic minority, % managers, sector, region, single or multi-establishment organisation, SIC, activity at workplace, if workplace covered by formal strategic plan, if LiP awarded, if workplace has a formal written policy on equal opportunities or managing diversity, individual union membership status.

Employees in unionised workplaces view management as most responsive to their needs when they think the union is having an impact on the employer, either because they think the employer takes the union seriously, or because the employer is favourable towards the union. Conversely, where employees think the union is not taken seriously by management, or the employer is perceived not to favour the union, management are viewed as less responsive. However, the situation is not so clear cut if managers' actual attitudes to unionisation are taken into account. Managers' support or opposition to unions at the workplace, and their preferences for direct consultation over consultation through unions, have little impact on employee perceptions of managerial responsiveness. What does matter is whether the employer actively encourages union membership by recommending it to employees. It is this active support of union membership, rather than underlying support or opposition to unions at the workplace, which influences employees' perceptions of managerial responsiveness.

Two other aspects of unionisation also emerge as important. One is the organisational effectiveness of the union, as indicated by union responsiveness to members' problems and complaints. The other is individuals' membership status: members are more critical of management than non-members, with never-members being the least critical. This may be the result of becoming a union member. For instance, unions may politicise employees through the pursuit of better terms and conditions or in mobilising opposition to proposed change. Alternatively, underlying scepticism about management may be one of the motivations for joining a union in the first place.

Some aspects of unionisation, omitted from the table, are not associated with managerial responsiveness. These are:

- Bargaining coverage
- Bargaining arrangements
- The number of unions on site
- The presence and nature of union representatives.

*Making the workplace a better place to work in:* One way to establish the overall effectiveness of a union is to ask employees in unionised workplaces what it would be like to work there if there was no union. Such a question was asked in the BWRPS in 2001 and BSAS 1998. In both cases, around half the employees say the workplace would be worse in the absence of the union, a proportion rising to two-thirds among members (Table 22). Only one-in-twenty (6% in BWRPS and 4% in BSAS) employees say things would be better in the absence of a union. WERS 1998 simply asks those who say there is a union on-site whether that union makes 'a difference to what it is like to work here', without specifying whether the difference is good or bad. One-third of employees say the union does make a difference.

**Table 22: % employees who think union makes a difference**

	All employees	Current members	Ex-members	Never-members
BWRPS	55	67	41	27
BSAS	49	64	33	26
WERS	33	40	19	22

- Source for row 1: BWRPS 2001, all employees at workplaces with a union they can join. Figures are % saying workplace would be 'a lot worse' or 'a little worse' if there was no union.
- Source for row 2: BSAS 1998, all employees at unionised workplaces who say workplace would be 'a lot worse' or 'a little worse' if there was no union.
- Source for row 3: WERS 98, all employees who say there is a union/staff association at their workplace and 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that the union 'makes a difference to what it is like to work here'

Perhaps most disconcerting for unions is the finding that four-in-ten employees (37% in BWRPS and 40% in BSAS) say the removal of the union would make no difference. The figure among union members is almost one-in-three (29% in BWRPS and 30% in BSAS). Similarly, in WERS, 40% neither agree nor disagree that the union makes a difference (36% among members). If the perceptions of employees in unionised workplaces are correct, the influence of unions at the workplace is very limited in a substantial minority of cases. Even if the perceptions are inaccurate, the low value attached to unionisation may make employees less inclined to purchase union membership. So how can unions improve employees' perceptions of their effectiveness in making the workplace a better place to work?

**Table 23: Union effectiveness – whether removal of union would make the workplace a worse place to work**

Union membership status (ref: never-member):	
Current member	38**
Ex-member	-12
Union recognised (ref.: union not recognised)	18
Contact with worker representative (ref: occasional, never or don't know rep):	
Frequent	12
Type of union representative (ref: chosen, volunteer or no rep):	
Elected	8
Power of the union (ref: too much or about right):	
Too little	-2
Employer attitude to the union (ref: neutral or opposed):	
In favour	15**
Union-employer relationship (ref: disagree or neither agree/disagree):	
Management/union work together	6
Union understanding and knowledge of employer's business (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union understanding of employer business is excellent or good	20**
Union open and accountable to members (ref: fair to failure)	
Union accountability is excellent or good	18**
Union sharing information about employer and workplace (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at sharing information	14**
Protecting workers against unfair treatment (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at protecting workers against unfair treatment	19**
Making work interesting and enjoyable (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at making work interesting and enjoyable	4
Promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (ref.: fair to failure)	
Union is excellent or good at promoting equal opportunities	26**

Working with management to increase quality/productivity (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at working with management to increase productivity	6
Winning fair pay increases and bonuses (ref.: fair to failure) Union is excellent or good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	13*
Who to go to first for advice about rights at work (ref.: all other sources) Union	31**
ORGEFF	14**
DELIVER	2

Notes:

- a. Source: BWRPS 2001
- b. Dependent variable is whether union removal would make things ‘a little worse’ or ‘a lot worse’. Figures are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees in unionised workplaces (N = 597). Figures are marginal effects for union-related variables entered separately.
- c. The marginal effect is the percentage change in the probability of saying union removal would make things ‘a little worse’ or ‘a lot worse’ holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of believing things would worsen is predicted to be between 55% and 57% depending on the model specification. \* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- d. Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, qualifications, occupation, full-timer, workplace tenure, establishment size, organisational size, sector, region, type of geographical location (ACORN coding), individual union membership status. Results were not sensitive to the inclusion of banded pay levels and payment methods, both of which were not statistically significant.

When different aspects of union organisational effectiveness and effectiveness in delivering improved terms and conditions are entered separately, most are associated with increasing the perception that the union makes the workplace a better place to work. However, when the different dimensions are entered together, ORGEFF has a positive, significant effect, but DELIVER does not. Furthermore, other aspects of unionisation remain significant, notably the belief that the union is the first place to go for advice on rights (marginal effect = 28%) and being a union member (marginal effect = 24%). Employers’ attitudes to unionisation are also significant, with positive management attitudes increasing the probability that removing the union would make things worse by 12%.

Turning to analyses of WERS, unions which employees think are supported by management are thought to make more of a difference (Table 24), echoing the BWRPS analysis above. However, this result is less clear-cut than one might imagine, since the association with what employers say is their attitude to membership is not so strong. Unions also make more of a difference where they have a strong power base on-site, as indicated by the presence of an on-site lay representative, higher union density, and the belief that management has to take the union seriously. Being responsive to members’ problems and complaints is also important. Some aspects of unionisation, omitted from the table below, are not associated with unions making a difference. These are:

- Bargaining coverage
- The number of unions on-site
- Bargaining arrangements (that is, single union, multi-union with separate negotiations and multi-union with joint negotiations)
- The presence of a closed shop or management recommendation of membership.

**Table 24: Union effectiveness in making a difference to what it is like to work here**

	Entered separately
Union membership status (ref.: current-member): Ex-member Never-member	-18** -12**
Union recognition and on-site representation (ref.: union not recognised) Recognition, no on-site rep Recognition, with on-site rep	0 +9**
Union density (ref.: 1-24%) 24-49% 50-74% 75-99% 100%	+9** +9** +11** +11*
Employee perceptions of management attitudes to trade unions (ref.: in favour) Neutral Not in favour	-22** -25**
Employer attitudes to trade union membership (ref.: in favour) Neutral Not in favour Not an issue	.4** -1 -4
Union is 'taken seriously by management' (ref.: neither agree nor disagree) Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	+61** +47** -8** -16**
Union 'takes notice of members' problems and complaints' (ref.: neither agree nor disagree) Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree	+66** +45** -20** -26**

Notes:

- Source: WERS 1998
- Figures in columns are marginal effects from logistic regression models for employees who say there is a union or staff association at the workplace (N ranges from 10286 to 9913). Dependent variable is whether 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that union makes 'a difference to what it is like to work here'. The marginal effects reported are the percentage change in the probability of the employee agreeing holding other factors constant at the mean for the sample. The mean probability of agreeing is predicted to be between 35% and 40% depending on the model specification. Technical appendix contains details of the procedure.  
\* = significant at a 95% confidence level; \*\* = significant at a 99% confidence level or above.
- Models also control for: gender, age, ethnicity, academic and vocational qualifications, occupation, hours worked, workplace tenure, if permanent contract, gross wages, establishment size, number of occupations at the workplace, % female, % managers who are female, % part-timers, % ethnic minority, sector, region, UK or foreign owned, single or multi-establishment organisation, SIC, activity at workplace, age of workplace, if specialist personnel manager responsible for personnel matters on-site, score based on incidence of HRM practices, number of non-union channels of communication, if IiP awarded, individual union membership status.

## 5. Incidence of 'effective' union practices and structures

Section Four identified aspects of unionisation associated with delivering improvements in work and working conditions. This section shows the incidence of these

union practices and structures within unionised workplaces and among employees in unionised workplaces. This helps establish the nature of the organisational challenge facing unions in their efforts to improve their effectiveness.

Table 25 shows the state of union organisation among unionised workplaces with 10 or more employees as portrayed in the WERS 1998. Despite union recognition in all these workplaces, a high percentage of employees remain untouched by the union, either because they are not members or because their terms and conditions are not set by collective bargaining. What is particularly surprising is the one-sixth of recognised workplaces where, according to the employer, there is no effective bargaining over pay. Where bargaining does occur, it is often above workplace-level. In nearly half unionised workplaces there is no on-site lay union representative, suggesting weak organisation on the ground.

Although there is little overt opposition to unions from unionised employers, a high percentage are non-committal about unions, and over half prefer direct consultation to working with the union. Only half agree unions help improve workplace performance, something that, no doubt, would improve employers' attitudes to unions.

Across all these measures, features of unionisation in the private sector indicate they are less likely to be effective than public sector unions.

**Table 25: % unionised workplaces with union practices and structures influencing union effectiveness**

	Private sector	Public sector	All
Worker representatives:			
Recognition, no representatives	37	33	35
Recognition, external rep only	12	13	13
Recognition, on-site part-time rep	49	50	50
Recognition, on-site full-time rep	3	4	3
Number of recognised unions:			
1	74	54	63
2	15	29	23
3	8	10	9
4+	3	7	5
Bargaining arrangements:			
Single union	74	54	63
Multi-union, joint bargaining	14	27	21
Multi-union, separate bargaining	12	19	16
Bargaining level:			
No coverage	30	8	18
Under 50% employees covered	9	20	15
Workplace level	11	1	5
Organisational level	30	27	28
Industry level	19	44	33
Multi level	<1	1	1
Bargaining coverage:			
100%	29	56	44
80-99%	20	5	11
60-79%	8	8	8
40-59%	6	10	8
20-39%	2	8	5
1-19%	6	6	6
Zero	30	8	18
Union density:			
1-24%	33	6	17

25-49%	21	17	19
50-74%	25	31	28
75-99%	18	30	24
100%	2	14	9
Members, DK %	1	3	2
Union membership arrangements:			
Closed shop	7	1	3
Strong employer recommendation of membership	10	28	20
Neither	83	71	77
Unions help find ways to improve workplace performance:			
Strongly agree	3	6	5
Agree	39	44	42
Neither agree nor disagree	24	34	30
Disagree	30	13	20
Strongly disagree	3	4	4
Employer attitude to union membership:			
In favour	45	74	61
Not in favour	5	1	3
Neutral	50	25	36
Not an issue	1	0	0
Employer would rather consult direct with employees:			
Strongly agree	24	13	18
Agree	37	35	36
Neither agree nor disagree	23	23	23
Disagree	14	28	22
Strongly disagree	1	2	2

Notes:

a. Source: WERS 1998

b. Figures in columns are % of workplaces recognising unions with these characteristics.

Table 26 presents similar information from the employees' perspective. There is further evidence that, despite recognition, many unions are simply not reaching employees: one-third of employees in unionised workplaces say there is no union on-site, and one-quarter say they have never been in contact with a union representative.

Although only 2% of employees in unionised workplaces work for an employer who admits to not being in favour of unions, many more (17%) employees in those workplaces believe that, in reality, the employer opposes unions. One-third think the employer does not take the union seriously.

**Table 26: % employees in unionised workplaces with union practices and structures influencing union effectiveness – WERS 1998**

	Private sector	Public sector	All
Worker representatives:			
Recognition, no representatives	12	15	14
Recognition, external rep only	5	6	6
Recognition, on-site part-time rep	65	61	63
Recognition, on-site full-time rep	18	18	18
Number of recognised unions:			
1	50	26	38
2	24	25	25
3	12	15	13

4+	14	34	24
Bargaining arrangements:			
Single union	50	26	38
Multi-union, joint bargaining	28	42	35
Multi-union, separate bargaining	22	27	26
Bargaining level:			
No coverage	16	7	12
Under 50% employees covered	8	23	15
Workplace level	26	4	16
Organisational level	38	24	32
Industry level	11	40	25
Multi level	1	3	2
Bargaining coverage:			
100%	24	58	40
80-99%	34	8	22
60-79%	14	4	9
40-59%	5	6	6
20-39%	2	15	8
1-19%	5	4	4
Zero	16	7	12
Union density:			
1-24%	20	9	15
25-49%	24	24	24
50-74%	22	27	25
75-99%	31	29	30
100%	1	5	3
Members, DK %	2	5	3
Union membership arrangements:			
Closed shop	3	1	2
Strong employer recommendation of membership	6	21	13
Neither	91	78	85
Employee perception of employer attitude to union membership:			
In favour	22	32	27
Neutral	58	55	57
Not in favour	20	12	17
Employer attitude to union membership:			
In favour	49	75	61
Not in favour	3	1	2
Neutral	48	24	36
Not an issue	<1	0	<1
Employer would rather consult direct with employees:			
Strongly agree	15	7	11
Agree	28	25	26
Neither agree nor disagree	26	27	26
Disagree	28	35	31
Strongly disagree	3	6	5
Union/staff association takes notice of members' problems and complaints:			
Unaware of the union	33	35	34
Strongly agree	7	8	8
Agree	37	36	37
Neither agree nor disagree	17	16	17
Disagree	4	4	4
Strongly disagree	1	1	1
Union/staff association is taken seriously by			



management:			
Unaware of the union	34	35	34
Strongly agree	5	5	5
Agree	28	30	29
Neither agree nor disagree	22	21	21
Disagree	10	7	8
Strongly disagree	3	3	3
Amount of contact with union/other worker rep			
Frequent	15	10	13
Occasional	38	39	38
Never	24	29	26
I am the rep	2	2	2
Do not know of a rep	20	20	20
Union makes a difference to what it is like to work here			
Strongly agree/agree	43	39	41

Notes:

- Source: WERS 1998
- Figures in columns are % of employees in unionised workplaces.

**Table 27: % employees in unionised workplaces with union practices and structures influencing union effectiveness – BWRPS 2001**

	Private sector	Public sector	All
Recognition and representation:			
No recognition, no representatives	2	1	2
No recognition, on-site representative	7	6	7
Recognition, no representatives	14	16	15
Recognition, representative volunteered	17	16	17
Recognition, representative chosen	5	4	5
Recognition, representative elected	55	57	56
Employer attitude to unions:			
In favour	31	50	41
Neutral	48	39	44
Opposed	16	6	11
Contact with representative:			
Frequent	23	18	21
Occasional	46	47	46
Never	29	31	30
Respondent is rep	1	1	1
Do not know of any rep	2	3	2
Impact on workplace if no union:			
Little/lot worse	51	58	55
No different	41	34	37
Little/lot better	7	6	6
Power of union at your workplace:			
Far too much	1	<1	<1
Too much	3	3	3
About right	47	57	52
Too little	37	29	33
Far too little	8	5	6
Don't know	4	6	5
Strongly agree/agree management and unions at my workplace usually work together	57	56	57
Would turn to union first for advice about rights at work	38	27	32

Union is most useful source of information about employer	4	3	4
Excellent/good at winning fair pay increases and bonuses	37	44	40
Excellent/good at understanding/knowledge of employer's business	56	66	61
Excellent/good at being open and accountable to members	51	56	53
Excellent/good at sharing information about employer	43	47	45
Excellent/good promoting equal opportunities form women and ethnic minorities	56	67	62
Excellent/good working with management to increase quality and productivity	42	45	44
Excellent/good making work interesting and enjoyable	23	29	26
Excellent/good protecting workers against unfair treatment	61	65	63

Notes:

a. Source: BWRPS 2001

b. Figures in columns are % of employees in workplaces with a union they can join.

Table 27 shows similar information taken from the BWRPS 2001. As noted earlier, nearly four-in-ten employees in unionised workplaces think the union makes no difference to what it is like to work at their workplace. A similar number believe unions have too little power at the workplace. And yet, over four-fifths of employees say the union has a representative – including over half with an elected representative – confirming the WERS analysis in showing that the organisation necessary to have an impact is in place in most unionised workplaces. In practice, however, only a fifth of employees in unionised workplaces report frequent contact with their representative and only around half rate the union as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ at being open and accountable to members.

Nearly six-in-ten employees in unionised workplaces think management and unions work together but despite this, only around four-in-ten think their employer is ‘in favour of unions’. Six-in-ten also believe the union has a good understanding of the employer’s business, yet only one-in-twenty identify the union as the most useful source of information about the employer.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite its importance in influencing employees’ decisions to join a union and remain a member, there has been little research on what constitutes union effectiveness and how organisational effectiveness influences unions’ ability to improve terms and conditions at work. One of the reasons for the paucity of literature in this area has been the absence of good national data. This paper begins to fill the gap, focusing on employee perceptions of union effectiveness. It does so with three data sets that are nationally representative of employees in Britain. Four points emerge from the analysis.

First, employees are able to discriminate across different dimensions of union effectiveness, with employees rating their union differently according to the issue addressed in the survey question. That said, aspects of union effectiveness are strongly associated. A broad distinction can be made between organisational effectiveness, on the one hand, which is about the internal workings of the union, and union effectiveness in delivering better terms and conditions for its members, on the other.

Second, union organisational effectiveness matters in delivering outcomes which are valued by employees, as indicated by the multivariate analyses identifying independent associations between various aspects of union effectiveness and outcomes such as better pay, protection against unfair treatment, promotion of equal opportunities and so on.

Third, aspects of organisational effectiveness differ in their ability to ‘deliver’ for employees depending on the outcome. Their effectiveness in the eyes of employees does not depend on being adept or competent in one particular area. Rather, they must be competent on a number of fronts – fostering relations with employers, getting to know the employer’s business, cultivating relations with employees, ensuring openness and accountability to members, having representative structures in place on the ground, and building a power base independent of the employer.

Fourth, there is plenty of room for unions to improve their effectiveness on all fronts, especially in reaching never-members and engaging with employers. Unions cannot do this alone. Employer support for unionisation has an independent, significant effect in raising union effectiveness. Unions therefore need the active support of management, something that is often lacking. There are benefits in this for management since, if employees are right, unions are most effective in working with the employer to improve productivity where the employer is supportive. Furthermore, as previous research shows, perceived employer support for unionisation is associated with greater employee trust in management, a valuable commodity for employers in its own right, and a sound basis for partnership (Bryson, 2001). If they can foster this support, while maintaining their independence from the employer, they may at least slow the rate of union decline in Britain.

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## Data Appendix

### The Workplace Employee Relations Survey 1998

The Workplace Employee Relations Survey 1998 (WERS98) is a nationally representative survey of workplaces with 10 or more employees covering all sectors of the economy except agriculture.<sup>3</sup> With weighting to account for complex survey design, survey results can be generalised with confidence to the population of workplaces in Britain employing 10 or more employees.

The analyses use two elements of the survey. The first is the management interview, conducted face-to-face with the most senior workplace manager responsible for employee relations. This was supplemented by a pre-interview self-completion questionnaire providing workforce data that might have involved interrogating records. Interviews were conducted in 2191 workplaces with a response rate of 80 per cent. The second element we use is the survey of employees within workplaces where a management interview was obtained. Self-completion questionnaires were distributed to a simple random sample of 25 employees (or all employees in workplaces with 10-24) in the 1880 cases where management permitted it.<sup>4</sup> Of the 44,283 questionnaires distributed, 28,237 (64 per cent) usable ones were returned.<sup>5</sup>

### *British Worker Representation and Participation Survey (BWRPS) 2001*

The *British Worker Representation and Participation Survey* was a collaboration between the Trade Union Congress and the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics. It was conducted as part of the monthly BMRB Access Omnibus survey. Due to the number of questions involved and the specialist subject matter the BWRPS was allocated nearly the whole omnibus survey to itself. Interviews were conducted using face-to-face computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) techniques. The fieldwork was conducted in two waves. Wave 1 was from June 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup>. Wave 2 was from July 5<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>. In total, some 3614 interviews were conducted as part of the Omnibus survey. Of these 1,355 people were eligible to take part in the BWRPS. The weighting schema used in this analysis ensures that demographic profiles match those for all employees in Great Britain aged 15 or over.

### *The British Social Attitudes Surveys (BSAS)*

The analyses also used data from the *British Social Attitudes Survey Series* (BSAS) for the period 1983-2001. BSAS yields a representative sample of adults aged 18 or over living in private households in Great Britain. The survey has been conducted annually since 1983, with the exceptions of 1988 and 1992, and usually achieves a response rate of 60% or more. Analysis is restricted to employees working at least ten hours per week, a cut-off used to filter respondents on questions relevant to employees. With weighting to account for

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive technical account of the survey see Airey *et al.* (1999) and for the initial analysis of the survey see Cully *et al.* (1999). The survey data sets are available from The Data Archive, University of Essex.

<sup>4</sup> The probability of worker selection is the product of the probability of the workplace being selected and the probability of an employee being selected from within that workplace. Cully *et al.* (1999: 306) note the advantages of this approach.

<sup>5</sup> The weighting scheme used in this paper compensates for sample non-response bias which was detected in the employee survey (Airie *et al.*, 1999: 91-92).

complex survey design, survey results can be generalised with confidence to the population of employees in Britain working at least 10 hours per week. Most of the data are collected through face-to-face interview, supplemented by a self-completion questionnaire. (For further details of the survey see Park *et al.*, 2002).

### **Technical appendix on factor analysis**

The BWRPS 2001 was explored using principal components factor analysis to identify measures of union organisational effectiveness and delivery effectiveness, and to consider whether reliable scales could be produced to measure these aspects of unionisation.

Six indicators of organisational effectiveness were identified:

- 5-point ordinal ratings from 'excellent' to 'failure' on 3 aspects of union activity, namely 'understanding and knowledge of your employer's business', 'being open and accountable to members' and 'sharing the information they have about your employer and your workplace';
- agreement/disagreement on a 5-point ordinal scale with the statements 'At my workplace management and unions are usually at loggerheads' and 'At my workplace management and unions usually work together'
- perceptions of whether the workplace 'would be a better or worse place to work if there was no union', coded along a 5-point ordinal scale running from 'a lot better' to 'a lot worse'
- perceptions of union power 'in your workplace', coded along a 5-point ordinal scale running from 'far too much power' through to 'far too little power'.

Two factors emerged with an Eigen value above 1. Inspection of the factor loadings after varimax rotation identified a 3-item scale. The scale is constructed by summing standardised scores (mean of 0 and variance of 1) for each of the three five-point ordinal ratings in the first bullet above. This produces a scale with a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .791 and average inter-item correlation of .558 consisting. This factor is labelled 'ORGEFF' for organisational effectiveness. The second factor consisted of the better/worse question and perceptions of power but, due to a low scale reliability coefficient of .34, it was dropped from the analyses.

Factor analyses relating to unions' effectiveness in delivering better terms and conditions were run on five outcomes with 5-point ordinal ratings (from 'excellent' to 'failure'). These are:

- 'winning fair pay increases and bonuses'
- 'promoting equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities'
- 'working with management to increase quality or productivity'
- 'making work interesting and enjoyable'
- 'protecting workers against unfair treatment'.

The analyses are run on four of the five items in each case, removing the fifth item that is the dependent variable in a particular analysis. For example, in the case of models estimating union effectiveness in winning fair pay, factor analysis was run on the other four delivery items, producing a factor with an Eigen value of 2.50. Summing the standardised

scores for the four delivery items produces a scale with a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .80. This factor is labelled 'DELIVER'.