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The closure of LG Phillips: AMICUS reps baseline questionnaire¹

Introduction

This report presents the first-part of a three-part survey of AMICUS LG Phillips trade union representatives. The survey was undertaken during the closure period of the LG Phillips plant in County Durham, AMICUS tendered Northumbria University to undertake a tracking exercise to map out the skills, current employment and trade union activities of representatives as they moved forward following the traumatic closure of the plant. The first-part baseline study was administered via a postal and telephone questionnaire, with representatives also asked if they would take part in subsequent research. Only two respondents indicated that they wanted either limited or no further part in the study. Overall the survey has three central aims:

1. To identify AMICUS shop stewards at LG Phillips Displays and establish their current level of involvement and commitment to AMICUS;
2. To work with AMICUS and the shop stewards to assess the strategies necessary to keep them involved with the union following the redundancies;
3. To track their employment record and union activity for an agreed period following the closure.

The LG plant closure directly cost over 750 jobs plus a further estimated 200 in the local supply chain (Evening Chronicle 3rd March 2005). The closure was blamed on the increased demand for flat screen televisions, which do not use cathode ray

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technology and plant director, David Coppock, further cited crippling prices and a shift in demand from Europe to Asia.

Manufacturing has traditionally been the largest sector for full-time employment in Durham and although there has been recent growth, the sector has been in decline. The overall labour market indicators for the County do not make easy reading and the closure has clearly not helped. The GDP figure for County Durham is well below the benchmark for England and has declined since 1995 (LSC 2004 County Durham Labour Market report, Learning and Skills Council County Durham). Unemployment figures for the county are above the England average along with the proportion of the population permanently sick or disabled, leading some to observe that the County has a benefits culture. The County LSC is ranked last in relation to the low proportions of consumer services, high-tech manufacturing and knowledge-based services available in the area. Given these facts it is not surprising to find that the County has low levels of skill attainment and high levels of those with no qualifications. The 2004 LSC report projected that construction and education were likely to witness the largest percentage increases in the county. It is within this context that over two per cent of the Durham workforce lost their jobs following the closure of LG Phillips and the following section reports the results of the first-stage baseline questionnaire.

The LG survey

The LG baseline survey was a questionnaire designed around three main areas: (1) personal details, including age, length of service at LG, and position at the company. (2) Qualifications, including qualifications held and the type of training undertaken at the company. (3) Trade union details, including length of AMICUS membership and union positions at LG, the type of support received from the union, and finally comments on how AMICUS could improve their overall support to representatives. Overall 30 representatives, including health and safety reps, were identified by the union as contacts for the survey. The main site convenor and chair of the LG Phillips EWC was contacted and liaison with him was established throughout the length of the

project. Nine representatives returned questionnaires, following a period of postal and telephone communications. This represented a thirty per cent response rate which given the closure situation and obvious problems associated with this can be considered adequate.

Personal and Employer Details

All representatives that replied were male, with one in the 25-35 age bracket, one aged 36-46 and the remainder 47 or over. All respondents had worked for the company for over three years, with one working for between 3-5 years, two between 6-10 years and the other six for 11 years or over. All respondents were full-time permanent staff with four of the respondents employed as either process or production operators; three held some form of team position, including a team trainer; one was the works convenor and chair of the company's EWC; and one a forklift driver.

Qualifications

Respondents were asked about their qualifications and the type of training undertaken at LG. Four of the nine respondents had CSEs, with one of this group also having an O level and another a GVNQ. One respondent held an O level, giving two in total, and a GVNQ, again giving two in total. One respondent had a Northern Countries Technical Examinations certificate and three respondents had no early formal qualifications. None of the respondents had undertaken apprenticeships, although the vast majority (seven) had undertaken some form of LG training. Training ranged from that which was job based, such as forklift driving, process control and lean manufacturing through to supervisory and team leader training. Other training was based on health and safety (three respondents), first aid and fire prevention (one respondent). Three respondents indicated that they held formal training qualifications, one held an NVQ Level 3 supervisory management certificate; and two possessed Institution of Occupational Safety and Health qualifications.

Respondents were also asked whether they had received any training through AMICUS, eight of the nine respondents indicated that they had, with three stating that they had undertaken over five courses; three noting between 3-5 courses; and two 1-2 courses.

Trade Union Details

All respondents were medium to long-term members of AMICUS. Three respondents had been in the union for between 6-10 years, one between 11-20 years and the remaining five for over 20 years. Six of the respondents had been shop stewards with four of these also having been health and safety representatives and two of the four further undertaking the role of a union learning representative (there were three ULRs in total). These two also held the position of works convenor and deputy convenor with one being the branch president, they also indicated that they held regional and international trade union positions including chair of the companies EWC. In total seven respondents had held a health and safety representative position.

All respondents indicated that they had joined the union when they came to LG, with six also stating that they had been in other unions prior to joining AMICUS. Two had been in the GMB with one of these further indicating membership of the NUM; another respondent also stated that he had been in the Durham Mechanics Association (NUM). The three remaining respondents stated that they had been in the T&G, MSF and the print union SOGAT respectively.

Respondents were asked why they become a trade union member (Table 1).

Interestingly the major reasons given for trade union membership were related to traditional trade union values, with eight of the nine respondents indicating that this was their most important reason for joining. Six respondents stated that they were 'union minded'; a further five indicated that they joined for 'better pay and conditions'; and five 'for support if I had a problem at work'. Five respondents choose two of these and one all three.

Table 1: Why did you become a trade union member?

Respondent	Union minded	Better pay etc	For support at work	Legal advice	For services	Training & education	Others at work in union	Other reasons
1	√	√	√	√			√	
2	√	√						
3			√		√			
4		√	√	√				
5	√	√	√		√			
6	√							
7	√							Closed shop
8	√							
9		√	√			√		

Other reasons given for membership were ‘free legal advice’ (two respondents); ‘services offered’ (two respondents); training and education (one respondent); ‘others at work were members’ (one respondent); and finally because there was a closed shop in operation, which led to a respondent comment of *‘I was very unhappy when that ended, the union should have had a ballot to keep it’*.

Respondents were asked whether they received ‘material’ (e.g. negotiation materials etc.) from AMICUS to support them in their union role. Eight of the nine respondents stated that they did, with all being positive in their views of its usefulness. Six of the eight indicated that it was ‘helpful’ and the remaining two ‘very helpful’, with one stating *‘the stuff is brilliant as it keeps you up to date both in your working life and private life, as my wife works on a non union site I have been able to help her’*. However, the web information offered by the union, perhaps because of age, had not had an impact with only three of the nine respondents accessing the AMICUS web site. Of these three two had found it ‘helpful’ and one ‘no help’.

Respondents were asked about their overall experience as an AMICUS representative and about their overall thoughts of the union. All reps indicated that their experience as reps had been a positive one, with three of the nine stating that it was ‘excellent’ *‘....always felt it was an honour to look after the interests of our members and AMICUS gave me the tools to do that’*, *‘....really enjoyed AMICUS and LG Phillips’*; four that the experience was ‘very good’,

'it has been a long hard slog but well worth it!', 'very well organised and structured'; and two that it was 'good', 'I found that the support of the other reps was very good but that the company was to some extent ignorant of H&S rules and practices and that to a large extent the work force did not care unless they were personally affected'.

Again all respondents were positive when asked 'to say one thing that was good about AMICUS...', *'for me in this day and age AMICUS have been a good all round bunch'* (respondent one), *'...forward thinking, not living in the past, moving and evolving into a union for today, while thinking and planning for the future'* (respondent two), *'...they are very supportive and always willing to listen'* (respondent three), *'the union is strong and well organised, there is always union support when you need it'* (respondent four), *'the natural loyalty of the reps'* (respondent five), *'big!'* (respondent six), *'given me so much experience, they have always been professional when I have dealt with them'* (respondent seven), *'AMICUS trains stewards to a high standard'* (respondent eight), *'the shop stewards committee at LG and our convenor were excellent'* (respondent nine).

Respondents were also asked 'to say one thing that AMICUS could improve', comments were mixed but a number were clearly related to the closure *'better communication between management and workers'* (respondent three), *'get rid of some of the full-timers who dealt with the closure'* (respondent four), *'sad about how we found out about the LG closure'* (respondent seven), *'more support from the top'* (respondent one). Whilst one comment related to the organisation of work *'...the ending of flexible hour contracts and any association with agencies'* (respondent eight); another was a general comment on the union and LG Phillips membership *'the union could be much better at motivating the work force in general, my experience has been that most ordinary members are only in the union in case they have a problem and some spend most of their time criticising the reps and union in general even through they are members'*, and finally one respondent believed that the union should *'improve its influence in Europe'* (respondent two).

Finally, respondents were given four main factors to 'rate' in order of significance, which would make them stay as AMICUS members (Table 2).

Table 2: Factors that would make respondents retain AMICUS membership

Factors	Degrees of importance 1 – 4 (NB 1 is the most important and 4 the least)				
	1	2	3	4	No Response
Reduced subscriptions if out of work	44.4% (4)	11.1% (1)	22.2% (2)	22.2% (2)	
Good services (legal etc.)	0% (0)	44.4% (4)	22.2% (2)	22.2% (2)	11.1% (1)
Good support from the union office	33.3% (3)	0% (0)	44.4% (4)	11.1% (1)	11.1% (1)
Want to stay active in the union	22.2% (2)	33.3% (3)	0% (0)	33.3% (3)	11.1% (1)

As can be seen the most important factor (1 in the table) was ‘reduced subscriptions when out of work’ with four respondents choosing this, closely followed by ‘good support from the union office’ (three respondents) which was also chosen as the third most important factor (3 in the table) by over a third of respondents (4 respondents). ‘Staying active in the union’ was the least most important first factor with only two respondents choosing it. Although, it was chosen by a third of respondents (3 respondents) as the second most important factor (2 in the table) with one commenting *‘I have joined USDAW at my new job as this is the only union. I have carried my AMICUS experience into this job and have been elected a rep already and next year I will take over from the retiring plant convenor’* (respondent 4). Good services was not considered the most important factor by any respondents, although, over a third (four respondents) choose this as their second most important reason (2 in the table) for staying in the union. Lastly, one rep criticised the union for a lack of urgency with regard to membership retention *‘at my new company I have indicated to the union that I want to stay as a member but I have heard nothing’* (respondent 7).

Early thoughts

The representatives identified in this survey have a solid trade union history and held traditional trade union values that will be an obvious advantage for AMICUS as they move into new jobs following the closure. All were positive about their experience as representatives in the union and given this the union should be optimistic that respondents, if they are able to, will continue their membership and may well encourage others to join the union. A challenging issue, though, for the Union is that seven of the

nine were in their late forties or older and this may influence the type and number of union activities undertaken in new jobs. Even though a third of respondents had no formal qualifications, all but two representatives had undertaken some form of training both with the company and or the trade union. The qualification/skills agenda may provide an opportunity for the union to keep respondents engaged where new workplaces have union learning projects or individuals may choose to either continue (three respondents were ULRs) or undertake a new role as a ULR. Finally it should be noted that even though the closure has clearly impacted on respondents feelings towards the union all were positive in the their assessment of the type of service AMICUS provides to its representatives. One respondent also reported, even though he had to join another union, he was already a trade union representative and was utilising his trade union experience at his new workplace.