



Focussing on bisexual trade unionists

The results of a TUC survey and recommendations for change

Background to the survey

The TUC set up a conference and committee structure for lesbian and gay trade unionists in 1998. In subsequent years, following resolutions of this conference, it was agreed to extend the remit to include bisexual and transgender people, and so the TUC structures have for a number of years been “LGBT”.

However, concerns have been expressed that the four component parts of the structure have not received equal priority. In particular, until a motion was placed before the 2009 LGBT Conference on the specific issues faced by bisexual workers, there had been no discussion of this at all. Following the conference, it was therefore agreed by the TUC LGBT Committee to carry out a survey and to prepare a report based on the findings.

The Survey

The TUC placed a short questionnaire on its website in December 2009 and advised unions of its presence, to encourage bisexual members to respond by 25 January 2010. The questionnaire asked respondents to identify their union, their gender (or transgender status), and answer questions on whether they were “out” as bisexual, whether they faced harassment from managers or colleagues, and their experience of their union’s LGBT structures. Respondents were given the option of replying anonymously.

Analysis of the responses

52 people returned survey forms. They came from ten unions. The breakdown by gender and union was:

Union	Male	Female	total
CWU	1	0	1
GMB	0	5	5
NASUWT	1	1	2
NUJ	0	2	2
NUT	1	1	2
Prospect	5	3	8
PCS	1	3	4
UCU	2	6	8
Unison	9	7	16
Unite	2	2	4
No information			1
Total	20	31	52

One respondent identified as trans.

A high proportion of respondents chose not to give their names (12 or 2 %), and this of itself is a worrying sign that even in a survey where their identities were guaranteed to be confidential, these members were anxious in case their sexual orientation became known.

Responses to the questions

Being “Out”

Just under half of the respondents (23) were out at work about being bisexual; however, 17 (33%) were not, while the remaining 12 said they were “out” to some people but not others. `

One reported

“.. although outright gay is a badge of honour, bi still carries a stigma that carries onto partners. Trans issues carry even more stigma”. (PCS member)

Another said:

“Not out due to fears of harassment – it’s a very socially conservative environment and I hear homophobic jokes and comments from all staff levels..” (Unison member in the health service).

A respondent who was “partly out” explained the reason as

“both staff and students have used biphobic language in the past, and because college management pretty much refuses to add in/use “bi” when talking about LG issues” (UCU member).

Another was chiefly affected by the consequences of the invisibility of bisexuality in his environment:

“Bisexuality is not on most people’s radar – many people are accepting of my same sex partner, but presume that I’m gay – it can be awkward fully outing/explaining that I’m bisexual.” (NASUWT member).

Similarly, from a Unison member:

“Some members of staff have tended to refer to me as gay, treat me and speak to me as if I am gay despite being told I am Bi. This I find to be invalidating though not malicious – ignorance perhaps”.

One conclusion from this response is that although the proportion of respondents who are not “out” at work may be similar to the overall proportion of LGBT workers who are not “out”, these respondents were members who must have been involved in a trade union network of some kind in order to learn of the survey, and it is disturbing that fewer than half the survey felt able to identify as bisexual –

several of them in workplaces where being open as lesbian or gay was no longer an issue.

Harassment from managers

Interestingly, by comparison with previous surveys carried out by the TUC, the proportion of respondents who had faced harassing behaviour from managers had fallen substantially.

Only one respondent reported facing harassment because of their sexuality directly from a manager. However, five reported indirect harassment by managers (that is, not directed at them personally), whether in the form of inappropriate comments about other members of staff, or general comments overheard.

Harassment from colleagues

In a response similar to the previous question, four respondents reported facing harassing behaviour from colleagues that was not intended for them in person. Several reported hostility from lesbian or gay colleagues:

“I have at times over the years received inappropriate comments, ignorant comments, “jokes” etc from colleagues, mainly from gay men and lesbians” (Unite member).

“..faced biphobia from gay trade union members” (GMB member).

“both lesbian and straight colleagues regularly question whether my orientation exists, without outright saying so – e.g. ... ‘saying it’s the person you fall for, not the gender – that’s bullshit” (unidentified union, education worker).

“some colleagues have used the old chestnuts of bisexuality being connected with promiscuity, greed and fence sitting” (UCU member).

Exclusion

Only three respondents reported that they had faced exclusion as a result of their sexuality, where the main issue appeared to be that colleagues made assumptions about them based on the gender of their partner. Others reported that they excluded themselves from social occasions because they did not like the particular “culture” involved. It was not possible to identify from the response to what extent this might also have reflected concerns about encountering hostility through not “fitting in” with, for example, “gay nights out”.

Inside the union

The survey asked a number of questions about respondents’ experience or perception of their own union’s commitment to including bisexual members. The answers to this section depended to some extent on whether the member as an individual has decided to participate, or not, in a union structure, and whether they have chosen to read newsletters etc. With a relatively small number of responses from participating unions, it would be unfair to draw conclusions about the success of unions’ efforts to reach their bisexual members. However, the survey showed that for the most part, respondents from Unison and PCS were content

with the way in which their union takes up bisexual issues, whereas the small number of respondents from Unite were not.

Comfortable in the union LGBT structure

23 respondents were comfortable in their union's LGBT structures, 8 were not, but 19 were not involved so could not comment.

One respondent noted that bi issues were "the least discussed" in their union.

Space for bisexual issues

The answers to the questions about the provision of space for bisexual members and issues and the promotion of advice, support or events for bisexual members were much more evenly balanced.

17 replies were positive, a couple suggested that there was "not much" provision, 13 said there was no specific provision, but 13 did not know. Therefore, only a minority of respondents believed that their union offered sufficient recognition to them.

Changes needed

Respondents were finally asked to suggest what they thought were the three most important changes they would like to see made in the way that their union represented their interests as bisexual members.

Although a number of respondents who had not been involved in their union's LGBT structures made no proposals for further action, only a small minority (3) suggested that no change was needed to the current position.

As this was an open question, it is hard to present every suggestion that we made within absolutely distinct categories. The most common proposals made fell under the following headings, and these constitute the recommendations of this report. Not surprisingly, the topics are quite closely related.

1. Education and training

Ten respondents called for education and training on the specific issues facing bisexual members to be initiated, either as part of the training already provided on LGBT issues (where the concern was precisely to give specific content to the "B") for union representatives and officers, or in training provided for LGBT members generally. This was closely related to the next heading.

2. Overcoming invisibility

A similar number of respondents urged that the key issue was to tackle the invisibility of bisexuality within unions generally. Several additionally mentioned that in doing so, it was vital to remember that bisexual members were themselves as diverse as anyone else, and not to lose that recognition in approaching the subject.

3. Challenging stereotypes

Five respondents, relying on their own experiences, stressed the importance of challenging misguided stereotypes of bisexual people as a critical part of the education that is needed.

4. Specific resources

Seven respondents identified that in order to tackle the invisibility and lack of support for bisexual members, it was important that specific resources were provided by the union. Some suggested steps such as space on websites, or bisexual networks for communication and support.

5. Union public backing

The importance of unions being seen to support LGBT members – and specifically in this context, bisexual members – was stressed by a number of respondents. Alongside this, it was recommended by several that unions give backing to events organised by and for bisexual people, such as the annual Bicon event, and support bisexual members' participation in them.

Conclusion

Although a relatively small survey from members of just ten unions, a clear message emerges that many bisexual trade union members feel that they have not achieved the necessary recognition of the specific nature of bisexuality within the overall LGBT umbrella. This was reflected in the numbers who were not able to be open about being bisexual in their workplace (including workplaces where the culture was not hostile to lesbians or gay men). The recommendations of this report, therefore, can be summarised as the importance for trade unions, as a part of their continued commitment to achieving equality for all their members, to recognise that within the overall framework offered by the title “LGBT”, members who identify as bisexual are frequently invisible; that the consequences of invisibility include the continuation of inaccurate and stereotypical views of bisexuality; and that unions need to plan the steps needed to make the “LGBT” truly inclusive of all four: lesbians, gay men, trans people... and bisexuals.