



Young Workers – Organising The Future

National Executive
Council Statement
to 2025 ADM



This Union exists to improve workers' lives and get the best possible deal for our members. To achieve this, we must ensure that we build a strong, growing Union.

In the sectors where we organise, there are hundreds of thousands of young workers who have not yet joined a trade union. This has always been a challenge for us, and for the entire Trade Union Movement. However, it is a challenge we must take up if we are to secure the future of the Union and to tackle the low pay and insecure work that blight so many workplaces.

Our Union must reflect the workers that we represent. We need to ensure that young workers know about the benefits of joining Usdaw and have the opportunity to join. We need to support and encourage them to become active in the Union and we need strong structures in place to ensure that young workers' voices are heard.

Organising young workers is not an addition to our strategy, it is essential to it. We must build further on the work we have already done to build our organising strength, create a strong Union for the future and change the world of work for the better.

General Secretary's Foreword



This statement sets out the importance, and the challenges, of organising young workers. This is something that has always been important to Usdaw. We have a younger membership than many other unions because we organise in sectors with a younger than average workforce. For many people, retail is their first experience of the world of work.

We all have a responsibility to make sure that young workers have the opportunity to join our Union, to benefit from support and advice at work. Many young workers are trapped in a cycle of insecure, low paid work, facing bullying, at risk from violence or abuse at work, or unsure of their rights.

There are often misconceptions about young people in the workplace. People can sometimes assume that young workers do not care about their job, especially if they are working part-time. However, the reality is that many young workers and their families rely on the income that their job brings in. Young workers are just as concerned about being treated fairly at work and being safe while they do their job.

Usdaw has worked tirelessly for pay equality for young workers, stronger employment rights, and protection at work. Whether it is through negotiations with employers, or lobbying the Government, we must be an effective voice for workers of all ages. To do that, we need to make sure that we are fully representative. We need to support more young members to get involved with the Union, take part in our democracy and have their say.

To meet the challenges of tomorrow, we need to increase our strength today - by growing our membership and recruiting and developing the next generation of union activists and officials. I am committed to doing just that, and I ask for the support of our incredible team of Usdaw reps to make it happen.

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a horizontal line.

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Section One – Why is Organising Young Workers so Important?

Trade unions must represent all workers in the sectors where we organise if we are to be an effective voice. There are large numbers of young people working in our sectors.

Information from the last census in 2021 showed that:

- Sales/Retail Assistant was the most common job for workers aged 16-24.
- Warehouse Operative was the fourth most common job in this age group.
- Nearly one in every five people employed as a Sales/Retail Assistant is aged under 25.

Union membership in the retail sector as a whole is only around 10% and we know that young people are less likely than their older colleagues to join a union. This tells us that there is a huge gap in representation for young workers in retail. Many young workers do not know about what unions are or how we can help them.



Young workers, like all workers, need and deserve a fair deal at work. When they do not have a union to support and advise them, they are less likely to know their rights and more likely to be exploited or discriminated against. This gives bad employers the opportunity to drive down working conditions, not just for young workers, but for all workers.

Young workers are at the start of their working lives and if they join a union now, we can expect them to be more likely to remain a union member in the future. It is vital that young workers do not just join the Union, but that they have a positive experience when they do.

A positive Usdaw experience is not only about knowing that you can get representation or advice when you need it (important though that is), it also means knowing that the Union is speaking up on the issues that affect you, whether it is to your employer or to the Government. Young workers are at the heart of some of our key campaigning achievements:

- Removing lower pay rates for young workers from our agreements and getting a commitment from Labour to remove discriminatory age bandings from the law too.
- Tackling insecure work by working with the Government to ensure the Employment Rights Bill ends exploitative zero-hours contracts and calling on employers to give workers more of a say on their hours.
- Lobbying the Government to create a new specific offence of assaulting a shopworker, and other key commitments on retail crime prevention.
- Winning new legal protections for workers from sexual harassment, including by customers or members of the public.

The impact of a young worker's experience of Usdaw goes beyond just building our own Union. We know that our young members may well go on to work in a whole range of other industries. If they take with them a positive story of union membership, and an understanding that together we are stronger than when we are alone, then Usdaw can play its part in building a bigger, stronger, more diverse Trade Union Movement in this country.

As working people, we face big challenges in the years ahead with automation, AI and the gig economy all potentially shaping the future world of work. It is essential that we continue to show our members and potential members that we are fit to meet those challenges and that we continue to grow, so that we are strong enough to do so.

Section Two – Issues Faced by Young Workers

Many of the issues that affect young workers will be the same as those affecting older workers. However, there are some areas where young workers have reported particular concerns.

Discrimination and Unfair Treatment

Research by UK Youth in 2024 found that harmful stereotypes and negative treatment of young people in the workplace are widespread. Nine in ten young people have experienced negative treatment in the workplace because of their age. Issues they reported include being undervalued (81%) and patronised (78%). Almost half (49%) of young people feel like they cannot progress in their career.

Having little or no experience in the world of work can make it harder to know what to expect and when you are being treated unfairly. Young workers might find it more difficult to get time off work because longer-serving colleagues get preference. They might find themselves left with the least popular shifts or tasks, including late night working or heavy lifting, without proper consideration of the impact on their health and safety.

Bullying, Harassment, Violence and Abuse

Many young workers are on the frontline and facing violence and abuse at work. They may be at greater risk from lone working and from working unsocial hours.

As they tend to have shorter service, limited experience, and less secure contracts, young workers can be particularly vulnerable and find it more difficult to speak up if they are being bullied or harassed.

While harassment can affect anyone, we know that young workers are more likely to experience it.

TUC research found that more than two-thirds of women aged 18-24 have experienced sexual harassment in the past year. This can happen at work, and also on journeys to and from work. For public-facing workers such as those in retail, the risk increases further.

Low Pay and Insecure Work

The minimum wage law allows employers to pay young workers less than their older colleagues for doing the same job. Usdaw believes this is fundamentally wrong. That is why we have negotiated with employers to remove age-related bandings in our major agreements. The Labour Government will remove discriminatory age bandings and make the minimum wage a genuine living wage.

As well as low paid work, young workers are more likely to be in insecure work, such as temporary contracts or short-hours contracts. More than 50% of our 18-24 year old members surveyed are on unstable hours. This means that more than 10% of their normal weekly hours are not guaranteed in their contract. This is much more common for young workers than for their older colleagues as 30% of members aged 25 and over were found to have unstable hours.

People often think that young workers are happy to work flexible hours, but the truth is that flexibility is usually in the employer's favour. In fact, young members were twice as likely as members overall to say they would prefer to have more contracted hours than they currently do.

Last Christmas, we saw worrying examples of agencies targeting young people to work as freelancers. As the gig economy continues to grow, young workers are at increased risk of missing out on key employment rights.

Mental Health

The Retail Trust has found that 82% of young retail workers aged 16-27 suffered a deterioration in their mental health in the last year - higher than any other age group, and 29% had missed work because of their mental health.

Members with mental health problems may well have rights to additional support at work under the Equality Act, but these rights are often poorly understood by managers, leading to workers not getting the support they need. Young workers' mental health issues can be overlooked, especially if managers unfairly stereotype them as lazy or unproductive.



Section Three – A Voice for Young Workers

What is the Issue?

Whether it is a lack of understanding of employment rights, bullying from some managers or a tendency to be given the worst jobs, it is clear that young people can benefit from trade union membership.

At the same time, unions need to organise everyone in the workplace. Having groups of people who are not in the Union makes the collective voice weaker when talking to employers.

However, three-quarters of young people have not joined a trade union in their current job. This needs to change. In recent years, as a result of large scale industrial action and the election of a Labour Government, there has been a growing awareness of the role of trade unions and the work they do to help members. Unfortunately, this growing awareness has not directly resulted in growing membership.



Who is Supposed to Fix it?

We cannot expect young workers to hear about trade unions on the news and then go and seek out a Shop Steward. It is up to us to understand the issues young workers are facing in our workplaces and then make sure we are seen as an answer to those issues. We know from our many surveys that young workers are more likely to be on short-hours contracts, that they are more likely to face violence and abuse from customers, and that young women are far more likely to face sexual harassment at work.

These are issues that the Union continues to campaign on and deliver results for our members.

The Employment Rights Act, which Usdaw has helped to deliver over many years, will bring in significant provisions to tackle both short-hours contracts and sexual harassment. We have also won protections for retail workers from violence and abuse.

This builds on years of progress with employers, but perhaps we do not get that message out well enough. Where workers in Tesco have a right to a normal hours contract, do new starters understand that this is something that Usdaw Reps fought hard for? Or where Co-op puts in additional safeguards to protect our members from abuse, do colleagues know that this came from our Freedom From Fear Campaign?

Many young workers tell the Union that they have not joined simply because they have not been asked. We also know that asking people when they start a new job is far more likely to be successful than trying to recruit them once they have two years' service.

Surely it Cannot be that Simple?

Of course, it is easy to talk about simply ensuring that every induction is covered and that every new starter is seen at least once in the first few weeks of employment, but if organising was that easy, we would already be at 100% density.

Like many other groups of workers, young workers need to see that they belong in the Union, that Usdaw is reaching out in a way they understand and that their concerns will be taken seriously. Put simply, we cannot try to second-guess what young workers want and we cannot simply try to add their issues in with others. We need to create a platform for young workers to raise their own issues and have their own voice in the Union.

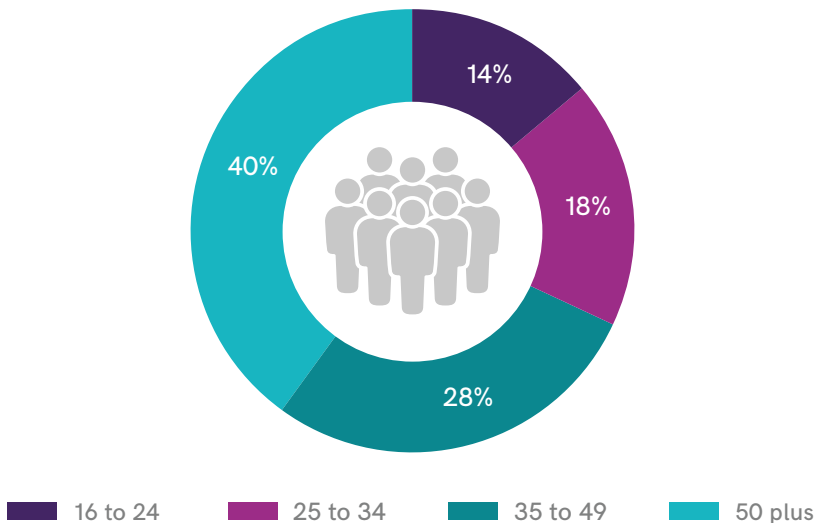
Section Four – Organising Young Workers: The Facts

Age Profile of Membership and the Workforce

The number of trade union members in the UK has seen a long-term decline. Between 1995 and 2022, total trade union membership fell by over 12%. Whilst this drop has occurred across all age groups, it has been particularly significant for young workers.

Over the past quarter of a century, the proportion of young trade union members has halved. Across the Movement, only four in every hundred trade union members are now aged between 16 and 24. Usdaw has always been one of the most successful unions in recruiting young workers into membership. Usdaw reps and officials have proven skills in engaging and recruiting young workers, and the Union also has a successful track record of delivering on issues that are important to these members, such as removing age-related pay for our big agreements.

Usdaw Membership Breakdown by Age



Usdaw's membership profile is significantly younger than other trade unions. However, our membership still does not reflect the number of young workers across the workforce. We should also not forget that young people are more likely to work in retail, and therefore more than 12.5% of those workers we represent are likely to be between the ages of 16 and 24.

It is also important to recognise that young worker membership in Usdaw has been falling in recent years. Around eight years ago, one in five Usdaw members was below the age of 27. This has now fallen to around one in seven.

What is the Future?

Unless we can turn around the drop in young worker membership, the future of the Movement is in danger. This situation has been highlighted before, and while the Union has survived, we have seen densities, and therefore our bargaining power, decline.

Engaging young people as activists in the Union, people who can demonstrate what Usdaw has to offer, will be key to ensuring that we can build an effective set of young worker structures. Unfortunately, while we have a reasonable number of young people in membership, we need to do a lot more in terms of getting them engaged and active in the Union.

A tiny proportion of our Shop Stewards are aged 16-25, just 3%. More than half of our reps are aged over 50. Of course, our older reps do an incredible job and work hard to support members of all ages, but we need our rep population to represent our membership. Young workers need to see that the Union is for them. We need to keep recruiting and developing the young reps who will be the future of our Union.

Think back to the last regional conference or Usdaw training course you attended. How many young people were there? Look around the hall at ADM and at those speaking on the rostrum. We only have one Branch Chair and four Branch Secretaries aged under 25 in the entire country. Our democratic structures, which are so important to the vitality of the Union, do not reflect the members we represent.

The next section will look at how we can build strong structures that can deliver for our young workers, but we all need to take this message to heart.

While we can create the structures at national and regional level to help develop young activists, the first steps to getting involved in the Union will always happen in the workplace. It is all of our responsibility to support more young workers to become active in the Union.

Section Five – How Can Young Workers Get Involved in Usdaw?

Usdaw has established young worker structures, designed to help young workers to:

- Find out more about the Union.
- Get involved in Usdaw activity.
- Feed ideas through the Usdaw officials regionally and nationally.
- Provide training and support to enable them to develop within and outside the Union.

Regional Young Workers' Committees

Young Usdaw members under the age of 27 have an extra way of getting involved in the Union. Each of Usdaw's seven regions has a young workers' committee that meets to talk about issues affecting young Union members. Recently these issues have included:

- Campaigning to tackle the issues young workers face at work.
- Getting our message across to young workers that they need unions too.
- Ensuring that young workers continue to have access to education.
- Targeting high street shops that do not recognise Usdaw where large numbers of young people work.

Each Regional Young Workers' Committee has an Area Organiser who co-ordinates the work of the committee. The Regional Young Workers' Committees give young workers a real opportunity to get involved and influence how the Union operates.

Members of the committee are elected for a two-year period, subject to them remaining under the age of 27. Following the election, all members receive training and support on the role of the committee and how they can make a difference for members.

Regional Young Workers' Get-Togethers

Each region can choose to run young workers' get-togethers for members and reps under the age of 27 to get more involved in the Union. Materials are provided from Head Office to support the agenda for these get-togethers, which are built around training and sharing best practice from across the different regions.

These events offer an informal opportunity for people to understand more about what Usdaw can offer them and how they can help to support their colleagues.



National Young Workers' Committee

Each Regional Young Workers' Committee sends one member to sit on the National Young Workers' Committee. This group meets around four times a year to plan events and to advise the Union on issues affecting young people. They ensure that the right people elsewhere in the Union hear the views expressed by young people at regional level.

Members of the committee are elected for a two-year period, subject to them remaining under the age of 27, and are automatically invited to attend the National Young Workers' Weekend.

National Young Workers' Weekend

Each year we organise a weekend get-together for young members of Usdaw. The weekend offers an opportunity to meet other young people, to enjoy a social event, but importantly to learn more about the Union. The weekend looks at general issues affecting young workers and is typically themed around a particular subject.

Political Representation

It's important for the voices of young worker members to be heard politically. Young workers face particular issues, both inside and outside of the workplace, and these issues need to be represented. As such, there is a reserved young worker seat on each Regional Political Committee, ensuring that the Union's political work is representative of voices from across the Union.

Ushaw also sends delegates to the TUC Young Workers' Conference and nominates one of the members of the National Young Workers' Committee to sit on the Young Workers' Forum of the TUC.

Other Events and Conferences

Of course, young members are not and should not be limited to getting involved in young worker structures. We want to see young workers attending our other events, like ADM, Labour Party and TUC Conferences, regional conferences, and campaign days. We're always looking for ways to make these events more inclusive and welcome feedback from members.

Section Six – Summary

Organising young workers is essential to the strength of the Union, now and in the future. There are large numbers of young workers in the sectors where we organise and it is essential that we give them the opportunity to join the Union.

Usdaw has been successful in recruiting young members, but we have seen a fall in numbers in recent years. We need to reverse this decline to build a union fit for the future. The Union needs young workers, and young workers need their union.

Young workers are facing huge issues in the world of work, from job insecurity, to discrimination, to violence, abuse and bullying, which are often having a negative impact on their mental health. We need to make sure that young workers can see the difference that the Union’s campaigning and negotiating can make for them. We need to support them to join and become active in the Union, to make sure that they have a say on the work that we do.

We have structures in place to support young workers to engage with the Union and to have a real say in how we work. We must ensure that we are encouraging young workers to participate at every level in the Union.

The future of the Union depends on our membership strength and our activists. While organising young workers is a challenge for us, it is a challenge that we can overcome with the right effort and strategy. As this statement makes clear, it is a challenge that we must overcome if the Union is to survive and thrive into the future.



Organising Plan

Here are some key actions that you can take to support our Organising Young Workers strategy:

- Map your workplace and identify any gaps in membership.
- Speak to any non-members about the benefits of joining the Union.
- Make sure that all inductions are covered in your workplace.
- Speak to members and non-members to identify any issues of concern in your workplace and come up with a plan to deal with them.
- When something goes well, share your successes. Make sure colleagues know what the Union is doing.
- Organise a campaign day in your workplace, eg a Mental Health Awareness day.
- Use social media platforms to promote the Union.
- Make sure that your noticeboard is up-to-date with relevant information.
- Talk to young members about being a rep - explain the role to them and answer any questions they may have.
- Tell members about our young member structures and encourage them to get involved.
- Run an event for Young Workers' Week in your workplace (preferably with support from young members).
- Explain to young members how your branch meetings work and encourage them to come along.
- Use your network - share ideas and experiences with other reps.

For further information about our Young Workers Campaign visit:

www.usdaw.org.uk/youngworkers





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