



Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

Do union activists need to keep their heads below the parapet?ⁱ

Carol Jess, Sue Ryall and Clara Cantal

"I don't discuss the union with my line manager. If you stick your head above the parapet your career is over." This comment from a fellow union member in the UK is a common perception, particularly strongly held by active trade unionists. Indeed, research carried out by *Personnel Today* and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2007 substantiated how widespread this perception was. They surveyed 583 Human Resource (HR) professionals and 524 union reps (union delegates), and discovered that 92% of the union reps believed their careers had been damaged by their union involvement. Further, 36% of the HR professionals agreed that union reps careers may be harmedⁱⁱ.

Similar questions were put to members of the Public Services Association (PSA) in New Zealand in a survey of union members carried out in 2016 in partnership with CLEWⁱⁱⁱ. In that research, four category of membership, reflecting different levels of involvement, were identified – inactive, active member, workplace delegate member, or 'Other' such as PSA network, national delegates, or runanga member).

The data from the PSA Survey suggests that while active members and workplace delegates believed that they were disadvantaged for promotion and career advancement that this is not what appears to happen in practice. Inactive PSA members surveyed reported a lower number of promotions and career advances over the previous ten years than either the active or workplace delegate members and yet the latter two were more likely to believe that they had been overlooked for promotion in their current workplace. Also, inactive PSA members were more likely to be a team leader/middle-manager or senior-level manager.

Much of this may be related to the length of service of the members surveyed. Inactive members were more likely to have worked in their current organisation for a period up to five years, possibly providing less opportunity for promotion. Active members, workplace delegates and 'other' members were more likely to have worked eleven years or more in their organisation possibly giving them more opportunities both to perceive that they were overlooked for promotion but also to have been promoted.

These results would suggest that while union members in the PSA agree with their UK counterparts in their perception of their career being harmed by union involvement, in reality the more active and involved union members appear more likely to be promoted than their inactive colleagues.

Workplace relations

Further discussions about the impact of active union members in the workplace involve questions of worker productivity and workplace engagement. While workplace delegates are more likely to report lower job satisfaction than active and inactive members, it appears that the inactive members have significantly lower public service motivation, while more active members, particularly workplace delegate members and employees with other type of membership (such as PSA network, national delegate or runanga member), are significantly more motivated by being in the public service than the other types of members. Additionally, it would appear that inactive members are significantly less resilient than their active colleagues. Active members, workplace delegate members and other members are more likely to report working more than their contracted hours. This could also be interpreted as evidence of both public service motivation and workplace engagement by active union members.

The good news for union members, is that, for the public services, union activity does not appear to restrict promotion despite their perceptions that it does, but those involved in union activity are less likely to be at a team leader/senior-level manager position. This is possibly due to a perceived conflict between their union roles and their position in the workplace. This research is just a small insight into how different levels of union participation may affect both members' perceptions of their workplace relations and their experience of the workplace. This would be a rich area for additional qualitative research to further clarify how member participation in the union affects their experience of work.

ⁱ All analysis for this article is sourced from Plimmer, G., Cantal, C. (2016). *Differences in variables included in the 2016 survey according to the level of participation in the PSA*. Wellington: Centre for Labour, Employment and Work, Victoria University of Wellington. Internal report.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.personneltoday.com/hr/being-a-union-rep-can-seriously-damage-your-career-prospects/> (accessed on 3 April 2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ Plimmer, G. and Cantal, C. (2016) *Workplace Dynamics in New Zealand Public Services*. Centre for Labour, Employment and Work, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington NZ