

COVID-19 and the work of trade unions: new challenges, adaptation and renewal

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The study: new empirical findings and new contributions

- Study conducted in late 2020 to explore the impact of the pandemic on unions.
- Findings make new contributions to the literature on union renewal:
 1. New empirical evidence about how unions adapted to new situations created by the pandemic.
 2. Union renewal should be understood as a process of transition.
 3. Renewal is possible in an economic downturn and where unions face unfavourable institutional arrangements.



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The study: methods and data

- Research conducted between October - December 2020 in the middle of the second wave.
- Online survey of union staff. Responses from 149 officials in 33 unions.
- In-depth interviews with union officials from unions & union federations in the UK, Australia, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden & the USA.



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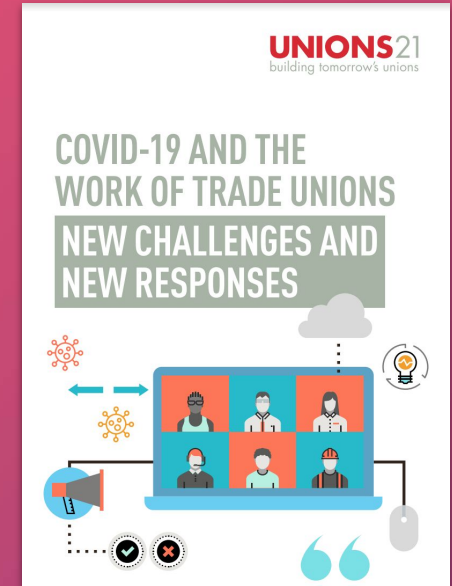
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How and where unions made adaptations to their work

Findings cover seven seven areas of change:

- Remote working
- Member engagement
- Member recruitment and retention
- Training members and supporting reps
- Representation of members
- Advocacy and influencing
- Democracy and governance

Report available at: <https://unions21.org.uk/ideas/publications>



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Four findings from across the study:

1. Unions rapidly adopted new online tools and invested in digital technologies.
2. New ways of engaging with members led to higher levels of engagement and with more members.
3. Changes were made, through necessity, at speed.
“The fact we had to shut everything down meant we just had to do it. An electric shock to the system is actually a benefit.”
4. Unions engaged in simultaneous processes of experimentation, learning and evaluation.



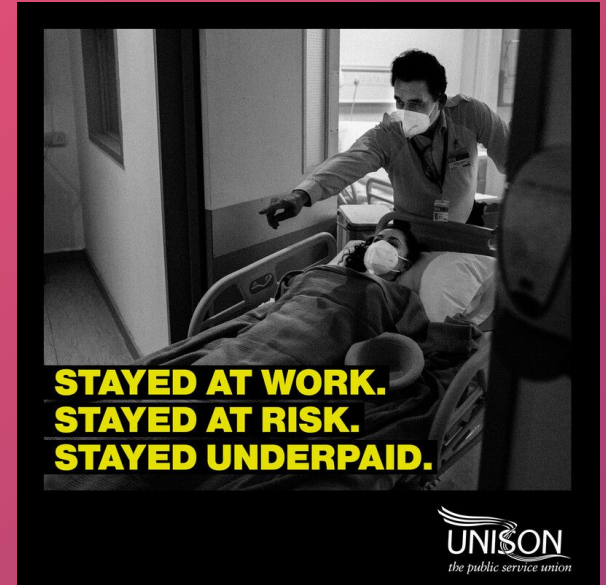
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Outcomes indicative of union renewal:

- Rising membership - 118,000 new members in 2020; the fourth annual increase.
- Greater numbers of workplace representatives
- Enhanced capacity
- A high level of confidence and optimism within unions
 - 70% of survey respondents said their union is stronger than before the pandemic.



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Why does this matter and what lessons can we draw?

- Study shows how unions can, and are, reforming how they work. Challenges a long-term narrative of decline. Provides new insights about renewal.
- Furlough scheme shows the influence of unions
- New opportunities for post-COVID social dialogue?
- Future research being planned.
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