

Trade Union Officials (Refund of Pay to Employers)

Motion for leave to introduce a Bill (Standing Order No. 23) 11 Jan 2012:

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move, that leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that pay for hours worked on behalf of trade unions by trade union officials during hours when they are paid by an employer should be refunded to the employer by the trade union; and for connected purposes.

The Bill addresses an issue that has recently attracted great public attention: the funding by the taxpayer of public sector employees who in fact work not as nurses, teachers, social workers, local government officers or civil servants but as trade union representatives. It was raised in an Adjournment debate last year by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Mr Burley) and I pay tribute to him for that, to my hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) for her work in the area and to other colleagues for their support today. The number of my colleagues in the Chamber attests to the importance of this issue.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This Bill attacks the most basic and most benign feature of trade union work—the day-to-day support for staff at work by their colleagues who are prepared to volunteer as trade union representatives.

Last time, the attack was led by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Mr Burley) in this Chamber. I had thought he might be detained elsewhere. I have to say to the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) that I am surprised to hear him attempt to bring in this Bill. He is gaining a growing reputation for hard work and intelligent comment, but his speech was a cheap-shot speech based on ignorance, ideology and inaccurate briefings from the TaxPayers Alliance. He talks about trade union accounts and public service, but the Bill is a broadside against trade union organising in both the public and the private sectors. It is a personal attack on around 200,000 people who are ready to help their colleagues by giving advice, by supporting them at grievances and disciplinaries and by negotiating with managers. That is difficult and demanding work, but many of those representatives are also ready to take on extra, special responsibilities for improving health and safety, equality, training and environmental standards.

The Bill is a personal attack on people such as Kevin Maggs, a GMB learning representative at A & P ship repairers in Cornwall. He organised open learning days for his colleagues at work and encouraged them on to courses. He says that some of them have been able to gain qualifications for a job they have done for years, whereas others have been able to understand their pay slip for the first time because of their improved literacy and numeracy. The hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire might not be able to understand that, but Ministers do. Let me quote the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, who said last year:

"I want to pay tribute to union learning reps, who have made so much difference to so many lives, and to such effect. Trade unions can play an invaluable and immeasurable role in improving skills in the workplace." That is why the Government are rightly investing £33 million to support union learning. It is part of the £110 million condemned by the TaxPayers Alliance.

Many trade union reps rightly receive paid time off from their other work to carry out those duties. Many also devote much of their own time to that work. A recent Government survey showed that reps in the public sector contribute up to 100,000 unpaid hours each week to carry out their duties. Our union reps are the unsung heroes of the long, proud British tradition of volunteering.

They are the workplace wing of the Prime Minister's big society. There should be receptions in Downing Street to pay tribute to their work. They support their colleagues and they save employers and the Exchequer millions of pounds each year by reducing the number of employment tribunals and days lost through illness and injury. By improving productivity and training, they help organisations to get through periods of great pressure and great change. I looked at the New Year's honours list this year and saw there were hundreds of civil servants, charity workers and business people on it-especially civil servants-but I found only one person, Mr Charles James from Leeds, who was honoured for the service he has given to his union and to his community. We should see many more ordinary workplace reps being honoured in future like Mr James.

I think that the House will have recognised that the hon. Gentleman did not quote one single employer. Employers are not calling for this attack; it does not even feature on the CBI's 11-point checklist of curbs it wants to see on trade unions. Many of our biggest and best British companies work with trade unions and recognise them-Rolls-Royce, Tesco, Virgin Media, Odeon cinemas, the HSBC bank and Jaguar Land Rover. Those names are known worldwide and those companies know the benefit of working with trade unions and know the benefit of trade union representation.

If we accept that employers as well as employees benefit from union representation, it is entirely right to expect employers to make a contribution towards the cost. That is why the hon. Gentleman's Bill is wrong. Let me say one final thing to him and his colleagues. Many trade unionists voted Conservative at the last general election-too many-and some even voted Lib Dem. They do not deserve this and the Bill does not deserve support from any part of this House.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided:

Ayes 132, Noes 211.