

Equality Rep Case Study

Ruth Henderson, PCS



Ruth is an Edinburgh based Equality Rep for PCS who represents members at the Scottish Government.

In my role I do around 80% negotiation with management and 20% personal cases. The most common cases I deal with are where a member has experienced poor treatment due to a disability, or where a member of staff has seen mental ill health develop or be exacerbated by the pressures of work or by harassment and bullying. As well as supporting members with their own cases and signposting them to sources of help, we bring issues arising from these to management and try to get policies changed. We help in the identification of issues and creation of policies.

I do a lot of training as an Equality Rep to help me keep up to date with what people need in the workplace and equalities issues. It can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking because you're in a group yourself you know everything – I'm disabled but there's loads I don't know about the experience of people with even my own disabilities. Likewise I'm a lesbian but that doesn't give me any expertise on issues a bisexual trans person might be facing in the workplace.



I make sure I'm involved in the networks within my union and my area to hear about other people's experiences and their voices of what they are dealing with in work every day.

Management can be a big barrier for Equality Reps. I'm lucky, but I know a lot of reps who have managers who don't want to release them for training or for any equalities work like running stalls for young members, attending networks or conferences, or anything else.

Another barrier can be yourself. I have heard loads of times "I don't want to say the wrong thing or offend anyone" or "I don't know the right words to use". Everyone makes mistakes so if it happens, it's not the end of the world – just listen and don't repeat the mistake. I don't think it should hold anyone back that they aren't an expert on every aspect of equality because no one is really! You just have to keep learning.

When the union takes equality work seriously it makes life better for everyone and makes all workers feel included, knowing the union has their back. People sometimes have an idea that equality work is an "add on" to main union business, or that it's not needed nowadays. If only! It's really a huge underpinning to all we do as activists, and it has to be considered in everything that a rep does. In some ways, we should all be Equality Reps.

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