



YOUR VOICE IN THE WORKPLACE



FOR CWU MEMBERS WORKING IN BT GROUP AND THE WIDER T&FS SECTOR...

ISSUE ONE, FEBRUARY 2024

YOUR GENERAL SECRETARY DAVE WARD INTRODUCES THE FIRST EDITION OF THIS EXCITING NEW MEMBERS' PUBLICATION AND SETS OUT THE MANY CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR 2024...

- A sharper, tighter and more frequent industrial publication
- Delivered to you at your branch or workplace
- A communicator, an engager, an organiser

Welcome to the first Edition of *Your Voice in the Workplace*. This represents a key part of our union's communications strategy. These workplace briefings will sit alongside a new weekly YouTube show, podcasts and more.

There are two, parallel, *Your Voice in the Workplace* publications; this one for our members working in BT Group and across the wider telecoms and financial services sector; and the other one for members working in RM Group and across the wider postal and logistics sector.

We'll be featuring key workplace issues, opinions and views from offices and out in the field, your concerns, your news and what's happening across the union. We're planning a monthly production schedule initially – with the aim of more frequent publication going forward – and we'll be sending the completed PDF product to branches and asking them to print locally and batch out to reps for direct distribution to you at work.

Most importantly, we want to hear from you - please send us your comments, ideas, suggestions etc using the 'Your union, your voice' section on the back page.

I'm writing this as I prepare to head to Manchester for our CWU Restructuring National Briefing as we set out a programme of change which will ensure the CWU remains the strongest workplace union in the UK.

It's been a very tough past few years for all of you – national disputes in RM Group, BT Group and the Post Office coming just after the end of our nation's worst public health crisis in living memory. This all came off the back of a life changing global pandemic.



CWU members kept the UK connected and posted during the pandemic and then stood up and fought for a fair deal at work.

Now we need to get ourselves in the best possible shape for the struggles ahead.

In RM Group we've got to prevent Ofcom and the failed mantra from the previous senior management team from destroying the postal service. We will put forward our own agenda of meeting the needs of the public, of businesses and our members. You have a massive role to play in shaping that.

In BT Group, we're getting ahead of the game in recognising the profound changes happening and working as hard as we can to protect our members' jobs and job security.

And we're focussing on the other vitally important sectors of our union too, building our presence across the financial services and tech sectors, defending the Post Office Crown network

and building a stronger base among postmasters – so cruelly treated by those at the top.

So 2024 will be a year of change, change for the CWU and also, hopefully, a change of government too.

Dave Ward.

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Gareth McMullan (centre) and his Civils colleagues at the snowy Mallusk Yard

MEETING THE NETWORK TRANSITION CHALLENGE

Your union working hard to prioritise jobs and job security for engineering members...

With the nationwide transition from copper-cable to fibre-optic cable increasing pace all over the country, the challenge of ensuring continuing job opportunities for as many copper-network (Service Delivery or SD) engineers as possible is the CWU's number one priority now and in the coming period.

Across Northern Ireland, this fundamental network change is more advanced than in any other part of the UK, with over 80 per cent of the region being able to connect to ultrafast full-fibre broadband. And Your Voice was invited over to meet with CWU regional co-ordinator Chris Brown and see first-hand how the union's Northern Ireland Telecoms Branch is taking a pro-active approach to this challenge in the best interests of our members.

"Out of our total Openreach Engineering membership in this branch, over half of them are copper-cable trained and experienced," he tells us, adding that "it's crucial that, as well as the opportunity to retrain on fibre, we need to maximise all other job opportunities within Openreach and ensure that our members have access to, and are encouraged to take up these roles."

And as the network transition continues, there are new workstreams opening up, which include copper-cable exchange exit and recovery (which was featured in the Summer 2023 Edition of The Voice) and an expanded Civils (network and infrastructure) operation.

"Over here, we've had a Civils workforce of 42, to which 15 SD engineers have transferred during 2023, with more due to switch over in the



Chris Brown with Brian Blair, Sam Weir and Jay Thompson in Newtownards

coming months," Chris explains. "The existing skills that our SD members have are extremely valuable in this area of work and massively complement the operation as a whole, while also enabling us to bring work back in-house that has previously been contracted out."

As well as the increased capacity for carrying out existing infrastructure work, a larger Civils team can also take advantage of new projects such as electric vehicle (EV) charging points installations to power the company's growing EV fleet. Over here, new charge points have been installed at Openreach's Portadown yard, with more to come at other units and plans being developed to work with the region's authorities to install EV points for the general public via the many street-corner green connection cabinets (primary connection points or PCPs) which could fall into disuse as a

consequence of fibre transition.

"There could be a Civils workforce of anything up to 150 or so over here – perhaps even more – if we can work with the business and externally to get these and other projects up and running," says Chris. "Most importantly, it'll provide ongoing quality employment for our members and also a quality service to the public, while also a source of revenue to the business."

It's already snowing when we leave Belfast early in the morning and, heading north out of the city to the engineers' yard at Mallusk, smaller roads are closed and even the major roads are becoming carpeted in white. When we arrive, the first group of Civils members we meet tell us that planned works further north at Ballyclare and other sites have been delayed by the extreme weather.



Engineer Andy Docherty in Lisburn

“WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THIS REGION IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF OUR UNION GETTING OUT IN FRONT AND SHAPING CHANGE IN THE INTERESTS OF OUR MEMBERS.”

Fiona Curtis, Acting National Officer for Openreach

As Gareth and Robert McMullan, Vinnie Carr and their colleagues wait for new duty allocations, they explain that they came from a variety of construction and public works backgrounds, that they prefer working for Openreach and they appreciate having the CWU trade union behind them to fight their corner. They work a regular Monday-to-Friday attendance pattern with 7.30am starts – and weekend working is on a voluntary overtime basis.

The arctic conditions ease a little and we head southwards to Lisburn to speak with Civils engineers David Brooks and Sean McAteer and FND engineer Andy Docherty – a former SD engineer who has retrained on fibre. We speak with them while they, respectively, complete an underground duct repair and re-cover, rectify a fault and provide a new customer connection, after which we move onto Carryduff to visit Paul Cunningham and Alan McDonnell.

Paul and Alan have both recently transferred from SD to Civils and they both tell us how they prefer their new roles. “This is far better,” says Alan, who has been on Civils since last October, after having worked on Service Delivery for three years previously. “The main difference is now we can do hard digs – and our previous experience helps us as well, it’s good to have that telecoms engineering background,” he adds.



Chris with Paul Cunningham and Alan McDonnell in Carryduff

Paul says: “I’ve been on this about four months now – I was working SD for about 12 years before and this is very different. We’re more able to get jobs done on the day. This job’s quite physical and it’s not for everyone, but I prefer this, we can get more done. On this job, for example, there was a cut needing to be done into a concrete step – which we can now do.”

Paul and Alan also work a standard daily duty on a Monday-to-Friday basis, with voluntary weekend overtime often available.

Our last call of the day takes us to Newtownards, where former SD engineers Brian Blair, Sam Weir and Jay Thompson are on a priority streetworks near a high-pressure gas main – a works known as a ‘hot-site’ due to its hazardous potential, explains Jay, who says: “We go out on planned works, but also to ‘on-the-day’ jobs as well.”

Jay came over to Civils last September and enjoys the variety of the job, which, he says, can take him all over the region, while Sam, who transferred at the same time, likes that “it’s

more focused on the quality of the work.” Brian has been on this job since last May and he was attracted by the prospect of broadening his skillset.

“I wanted something that was a new challenge,” he says, adding that he would encourage SD members to give the job a try.

The group explain that there is a one-week ‘trial’ period available for engineers considering the switch and, as Sam points out: “It doesn’t suit everyone, but they can come out on a week’s ‘buddying’ with people like us and then if the person doesn’t like it, they have the option to go back.”

CWU acting national officer for Openreach members Fiona Curtis says: “What’s happening in this region is a good example of our union getting out in front and shaping change in the interests of our members. As the rest of the UK completes the transition to full-fibre networks, it’s so important that we work together to maximise ongoing job opportunities.”

SUPPORTING OUR MEMBERS IN OPENREACH

Speaking with the acting national officer for our Openreach members Fiona Curtis, we asked about other major current issues...

The business has just announced a senior management reorganisation from 1st April across fibre-network delivery (FND) desk. The reorganisation will not have an impact on team members, however, we do have multiple issues which we've been continually flagging up across that operation," she replies, citing the key points as grading and the way that flex operates.



"If any FND desk members have any other concerns and issues, we're asking them to flag these up to their branch asap," Fiona adds.

In service delivery, several issues have been raised in different parts of the UK related to Customer Delivery Rates, the acting national officer continues, saying: "We've managed to resolve the problems so far, but once again, if members feel their own management are moving away from the agreed supportive approach here, then we ask that they flag this up at branch level in the first instance so that the union can assist."

With SD frames volumes reducing, a big challenge is addressing consequent resourcing, so an 'expression of interest' communication has gone out to ask members if they are interested in an alternative SD UK Ops position or a role in Civils.

"We are aware," Fiona points out, "that a lot of people within Frames might have some restricted capabilities – but there is an agreement in place with the business to ensure that these are taken fully into account."

Having covered the role of CWU national officer for Openreach members for nearly two years now, she says: "It's great to get out and about meeting members in the field and desk, doing everything we can to support them and to try to resolve their issues – as well as being proactive in workplaces."

"As a union, our Number One priority is that we're all standing together protecting our members and their pay, terms and conditions. I know from my own field and desk experience what a challenging job it is and members deserve to be fully recognised for this."



DGS ANDY KERR

2024 A YEAR OF CHANGE

I am writing this column knowing that within three months I will be passing on the DGS T&FS baton to my good friend and comrade Karen Rose, who takes up the post following our Annual Conference.

In the 16 years that I've headed up the Telecoms and Financial Services Constituency we've witnessed considerable change within the sector, and that has certainly kept me on my toes!

That said, the fundamental issues have always been essentially the same: Job losses; outsourcing; the reskilling and upskilling of our members against the backdrop of technological change; ensuring that pay at least keeps pace with the rising cost of living and that terms and conditions are maintained and improved upon where possible.

A huge priority for the union has been to address declining membership – and this hasn't been easy as technological advances have resulted in so many job losses that we've had to constantly recruit to even stand still.

Whilst this isn't new, it's now happening at a faster pace than ever before – and hence the reason that the CWU simply has to evolve and change.

The union as a whole is looking at its structures to ensure we can deliver everything that is required to continue to be relevant to our members. The T&FS constituency has agreed key objectives that ensure our members are at the heart of everything we do and that we empower them to make a difference in the workplace.

I'm certain that Karen will continue with progressing our strategy to grow membership, campaign on issues that our members want to fight for and increase our workplace representatives so that we can ensure we build our movement to be stronger and fit for the future.

So it's with a heavy heart that I am leaving, but I'm happy to know that I'm passing the role on to someone who has the experience, gravitas and proven capability to build on this work.

Andy Kerr

YOUR UNION, YOUR VOICE

Let us know what you think of your new publication, what do you think of the subjects covered? Comments to: Publications editor, kstewart@cwu.org

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