Maria Exall outlines why trade unions must be at the forefront of the push for Trans people’s rights

The CWU has responded to the Government’s consultation on reform of the Gender Recognition Act, calling for “a social model of gender reassignment so that trans people are not reliant on a medical diagnosis of illness and a lengthy derogatory process before they are recognised for who they are.” The response also supports the right of all women (including trans women) to continue accessing safe spaces such as domestic violence agencies and rape crisis centres. The CWU is calling for more funding and resources for the Equality & Human Rights Commission to ensure effective enforcement of this right under the Equality Act.

CWU’s positive steps to address violence against Trans people

The CWU is campaigning hard for not just our own trans members, but trans people everywhere. Steps are already underway to make the union more understanding of the issues faced by trans people – with a pilot trans awareness course currently being designed for CWU reps that will be rolled out at the Elstead Hotel in Bournemouth soon.

General secretary Dave Ward said: “We recognise the enormous difficulties many trans people have and we have an obligation to help build a better society for everyone. The CWU will continue to push hard to make sure trans voices are heard in the workplace and I hope branches will embrace the course and send reps to be trained accordingly.”

Trans people deserve our support

UC Congress this year welcomed the recently announced Government consultation on the Gender Recognition Act (GRA). Unions, including the CWU, unanimously agreed that reforming the GRA will lead to greater equality at work and in wider society.

We’ve seen recently the increasing visibility and empowerment of trans and non-binary people in our society. As a proud feminist trade unionist, I see this as progressive. It fits with the long-standing aims of the women’s movement – to challenge the narrow gender stereotypes that can trap us. The current arrangements on gender recognition are not fit for purpose and are frankly humiliating for many of the people involved – including

the need for a medical diagnosis of ‘gender dysphoria’

Trans people should not be subject to intrusive medical assessments. They should be able to self-identify without jumping over bureaucratic hurdles. Like all of us, trans people should be able to live their lives in dignity free from the threat of harassment and abuse.

Many trans people have a difficult time at work, with almost half saying they have experienced bullying or harassment. Some seven in 10 say that this has had a negative effect on their mental health. A shocking one in eight trans employees have been physically attacked by colleagues or customers in the last year.

Unsurprisingly, half of trans and non-binary people have hidden or disguised the fact that they are LGBT at work because they are afraid of discrimination.

As trade unionists and workplace equality reps we know from what our CWU trans members tell us how transphobia and discrimination affects them. And prejudice exists away from work too.

Two in five trans people, and three in ten non-binary people, have experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the last 12 months. More than two in five trans people avoid certain streets altogether because they don’t feel safe there as an LGBT person. These are the reasons why we need change.

Maria Exall
Taking forward the women's agenda

Female reps from across the UK converged on CWU headquarters in September for the annual get together of women officers. Over 55 women took part in a thoroughly enjoyable session which covered various aspects around engagement and empowerment of their roles.

Chair of the Women’s Advisory Committee, Jean Sharrocks, said: “It was fantastic to see so many CWU women ready and willing to take issues forward on the women’s agenda. On speaking to women around the room it was evident that a significant element were first time attendees, including several young workers. This is a testament to the pathways that currently exist allowing more women to get involved through their regions and branches.”

Coming shortly after the launch of the union’s new Period Poverty campaign (seen www.cwu.org/campaign/period-poverty/) the army of women activists seized the opportunity to promote the union’s call for free access to sanitary products. Template letters were shared with attendees, who pledged to write to their local councillors. Anyone wanting a copy of the template should contact the Equality Department (details right).

Jean continued: “The CWU is keen to bring more women through into its structures, so if you’re interested in coming along to meetings, which will be a safe space for women, please get in touch with your local regional women’s secretary.

“Every one of the 10 regions in the UK has a regional women’s committee and invariably there’s something going on that you can get involved in. Every branch should also have a women’s officer, who can also give advice on local opportunities to participate.”

One of the big talking points at the seminar was a discussion around ‘banter’. “There was evidence of some really awful language being used in the workplace and no-one has to put up with this. Ultimately, everyone should respect each other and the CWU is a firm believer in this mantra,” concludes Jean.

To find out more about getting involved, or to order copies of the Period Poverty campaign template letter, email the fhussein@cwu.org

CWU takes centre stage in Scottish women’s trade unionism

CWU Scotland No.1 branch activist Joyce Stevenson has been elected chair of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) Women’s Committee for the forthcoming year.

Joyce’s influential new position at the helm of the committee – which brings together women from across Scotland’s trade union movement to provide a collective platform for campaigning – was confirmed at the end of the STUC Women’s Conference.

During the preceding days the CWU had played an active role in passionate debate on a wide range of issues, including the risks posed by technological advances that will lead to increasing automation, the impact of austerity on women, harassment, abuse and the particular challenge posed by the nation’s deteriorating mental health.

First time CWU speaker, Michelle Reid-Hay of Glasgow District Amal, moved a motion on behalf of the union’s Scottish Regional Women’s Committee highlighting an “alarming increase of mental health issues throughout the workplace” and the prevalence of mental health problems amongst women in Scotland.

“Although many employers provide a level of support and assistance, this does not always include face-to-face counselling, and we believe this service is essential in tackling such an important issue,” Michelle told delegates in Dundee.

There was backing for the CWU’s call for the STUC Women’s Committee to “work closely with affiliates in collating information, to establish what employers currently have in place, and to provide a report at the earliest opportunity.” Delegates agreed it was essential that unions work collectively to improve understanding and recognition of mental health issues in the workplace.

Progressing the terms of the motion will form part of Joyce’s agenda for the coming year in her new role.
Waking up to a mental health time bomb

With mental health concerns in BT already under the spotlight (see page 6 of The Voice), Disability Advisory Committee member Natalie Fleming laments the yawning chasm between policy and practice.

BT has excellent Group-level policies on mental health and well-being – but by the time they trickle down to lower level management they appear irrelevant when set against targets for sick absence. Reps are seeing more and more vulnerable people struggling back to work too soon, then receiving letters which suggest the possibility of their contract being terminated. Because they are not 100 per cent, their performance suffers and they find themselves in another BT process, which again doesn’t allow for the complexities of mental health issues. This really is a vicious circle that has only one victim, the member.

As reps we’ve all attended numerous meetings with members and put forward mitigating circumstances, in many cases explaining that our members have felt suicidal. The managers listen, but still give the member a warning. We then go to appeal, only to be told how much the absence has affected the customer, the company and the brand – and the warning is upheld. This is a stressful process for the member and in many cases we are seeing them going off on sick leave again, taking the process to the next stage.

The other side to this, is the impact that dealing with vulnerable members and confrontational managers has on the union rep. We as reps must always remember that our own mental health is precious and we must look after ourselves. I personally have used the services of RehabWorks during a particularly difficult time for me mentally this year and I would suggest that if anyone is feeling anxious or stressed they should take advantage of this free confidential service.

Mental health and performance management

Jonathan Bellshaw argues the legal and moral case for ‘reasonable adjustments’ to be made for people with mental health issues - and has some simple advice when these are not forthcoming.

Alongside the well-documented increase in the number of individuals suffering from mental health issues, in recent times we’ve seen an exponential increase in companies’ use of performance management. So what can we as union reps do to help those who face performance management, whilst confronting mental health issues?

First and foremost there’s a need to dispel the myth that, if you suffer from mental health issues, you can’t be performance managed. This isn’t true. You can be performance managed but the company has a legal and moral duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’.

These often don’t have to be big adjustments – ranging from how conversations are approached with an individual to allowing them additional handling time to deal with calls. It really isn’t rocket science, yet sadly companies often seem unwilling to make these simple changes.

So what should you do if you find yourself in this position? Here’s a helpful checklist:

1. Speak to your union rep for advice
2. Request an occupational health report
3. Be honest with your manager
4. Don’t be afraid to challenge
5. Keep your union rep updated

By the time [group policies] trickle down to lower management they appear irrelevant when set against targets for sick absence...

CWU mental health strategy taking shape

The growing prevalence of serious mental health issues affecting members in an ever more stressful and demanding world of work means that a comprehensive strategy is now required to ensure the union can provide the best possible support for members and reps experiencing problems. That was the unanimous conclusion of delegates at this spring’s CWU Annual Conference - and, since then, a special working group has been working hard developing a joined-up response to a mental health crisis that is fast becoming endemic.

That response will include:

- Building on relationships that have already been forged with outside bodies like charities working in the area;
- A unified approach to training, which will comprise the existing CWU Mental Health Awareness Course and the Mental Health First Aid Course;
- Communicating more effectively with branches, reps and members on the importance of building awareness and encouraging openness;
- Providing support for reps who are impacted through dealing with members with mental health issues.
Black history needs to be taught all year round

Mark Bastiani argues that there’s not enough black history taught in schools, with Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people being effectively airbrushed out.

Why do we have Black History month in October? Surely my history is all year round and should be celebrated like that in schools and wider society.

If you look at recent events, with demos against the far-right, neo-fascist and other right-wing groups, I’m left wondering whether education at a young age would have helped these people appreciate the role that Black people have played in building this country.

When you hear bigots shouting abuse it’s clear that they know nothing about history or the facts. Yet these people often have children of their own, and it’s terrifying to think how easily they could be susceptible to the untruths they hear at home.

I believe every person in education, from primary school right up to leaving age, should have one lesson a week on multiculturalism.

Slavery, some say, started in 1619, but this is not always taught in schools. Why not?

Even though slavery ended in Britain in 1807 it continued until 1834 in the Caribbean and as late as 1865 in some southern US states. Is that taught in schools? If not, why not?

Why do children in schools not hear more about people like the Jamaican nurse, Mary Seacole, who tended the wounded in the Crimean War of 1854?

Long overlooked, in stark contrast to Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole is now mercifully included in the National Curriculum – but how many youngsters emerge from school knowing that 350,000 African Americans in segregated units fought in World War I?

Some 171 were honoured with the French Legion of Honour. The British West Indies Regiment had over 15,500 troops. The German troops had a nickname for the black troops fighting them in France – some of the most decorated being the ‘Tirailleurs Senegalais’ – calling them ‘Black Devils’ for the courageous way they fought.

Walter Tull, a Tottenham Hotspur football player who served in the Great War made the rank of lieutenant. Good books to read at school could be Black Poppies, written by Stephen Bourne, or As Good As Any Man: Scotland’s Black Tommy, written by Morag Miller with contributions from Roy Laycock, John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville. Yet this history is not taught in schools.

Why not?

Some 400,000 Muslim soldiers fought for the British in World War I. I must have missed that lesson too!

Some 125,000 African Americans fought in World War II – yet even when their contributions have made it into the pages of history books there is often a sense that contribution has been wittingly or unwittingly diminished.

Colonel Ismail Khan, who served with the Indian Army, said: “There is always the sense that the Indian troops weren’t quite as good as the British, and the writers have tended to ignore their efforts or to contend them by attacking their fighting spirit or exaggerating the desertions.”

What we never seem to be told is that India raised the largest volunteer forces in both world wars – some 1.5 million in WWI and 2.5 million in WWII.

Despite the sacrifices made by so many, post-1945 it didn’t take long for racism to rear its ugly head, particularly with regards to the allocation of housing and jobs. “It seems as if no sooner had one (war) ended and then another began,” said Laurent Phillipotts. “But just like the last war, it’s a battle we are slowly winning.”

The Victoria Cross is the highest and most prestigious award of the British honours system – awarded for gallantry “in the presence of the enemy” to members of the British Armed Forces. Among those awarded the VC, some posthumously, are Johnson Beharry, Nand Singh, Rambahadur Limbu, Fazal Din and Bhanbhagta Gurung.

If only facts like these were taught in schools, many more of us would be aware of the important roles that Black people have played in the history of the making of this country – and that could only be helpful in the fight against uneducated, foul-mouthed bigotry.