UNISON POLITICAL FUNDS FACT SHEET – THE POLITICAL FUNDS AVAILABLE AND WHY IT IS ALWAYS IMPORTANT TO VOTE YES IN POLITICAL FUND BALLOTS

Trade unions have always been involved in politics. But it was only made lawful for them to do so just over a century ago. The Trade Union Act 1913 allowed unions to pursue political objectives if they had established a political fund approved by a ballot of their members.

In 1984 the Conservative Government introduced new laws which required unions to hold a new ballot every 10 years to keep their political funds. The definition of political objectives was extended to include persuading people to vote or not to vote for a political party or candidate and unions were obliged to use full postal ballots.

UNISON’S POLITICAL FUNDS – WHAT THEY DO

Unison campaigns hard to defend jobs and services and to promote equality, defend pensions and protect the health and safety of members. These campaigns would not be effective without our political funds.

Unison has a tradition of political campaigning on behalf of our members which includes affiliation to the Labour Party, helping to decide its policies and its leadership in elections and campaigning for members independently of any political party through the General Political Fund (GPF).

Unison has links with MPs to help represent members’ interests in both Houses of Parliament, in the devolved parliaments and assemblies and in Europe – to push for changes to legislation and raise questions.

This link with Parliament is a vital part of Unison’s activities. It means your union has a voice in influencing both Government policy and legislation.

Unison also runs high profile public campaigns in support of our public services, in defence of pensions and against racism and inequality, which are all issues counted as “political”.

It is important when the 10 year ballot cycle occurs to stress that a “Yes” vote is a vote for choice. Members will not be obliged to contribute to the fund if they vote “yes” but they will be allowing others to do so. A “no” vote will deny all members this right.

Members have the choice of contributing to either the General Political Fund or Unison Labour Link (Affiliated Political Fund), to none or to both as they wish.
UNISON’S GENERAL POLITICAL FUND

UNISON uses its General Political Fund to pay for campaigning at branch, regional and national levels as well as research and lobbying in Parliament where it jointly, with Unison Labour Link, works with a group of Labour MPs to highlight UNISON and public service interests. The fund is independent of support for any political party. In the lead up to general or location elections, it has been used in effective advertising campaigns to ensure that issues of importance to UNISON are on the agenda.

In recent years UNISON has used the fund to campaign for devolution in Scotland, Wales, Greater London and the North of England, lobbying vigorously for effective staff protection. It assisted in the peace process in Northern Ireland. It has also been used in campaigns against cuts, privatisation and attacks on the National Health Service and local government. It has funded a campaign against the BNP in the local and European elections.

The fund is used by branches in their own campaigns against outsourcing, housing transfers and other political attacks.

UNISON LABOUR LINK – THE AFFILIATED POLITICAL FUND

UNISON Labour Link campaigns for members interests through affiliation to the Labour Party, both nationally and locally.

Those paying the affiliated levy can participate in Labour Link activities and through our representatives in the Party make their contribution on policy and organisational issues. They receive regular Labour Link information and they are able to vote in elections for the Labour leadership team nationally and for Labour’s leaders in Scotland, Wales and the candidate for London Mayor.

The Labour Party is the only party where unions can take part in policy-making and through the affiliated relationship are actually part of the party and have been through its 100 years history.

UNISON Labour Link works closely with a group of over 70 Labour MPs in Westminster. Many of them are members of UNISON or have a keen interest in public services. There are also effective links with Labour Members of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and Assembly Members in Cardiff where our input has had positive results for public services. WE also work closely with a number of Labour MEPs so that members’ interests are well represented in Europe.

Among the key issues that Labour Link is promoting are increased investment in public services, ending the two-tier workforce, equal pay and protecting pensions. The link with Labour means that affiliated members have their voice in the Labour Party at all levels from the local Constituency Labour Party to Annual Conference.
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY HAVE A POLITICAL FUND AT ALL?

The law says a union must have a separate political fund if it wants to spend money for “political purposes”. This puts UNISON potentially at risk because even bread and butter work such as campaigning to defend the NHS to defend pensions or promote health and safety to oppose the privatisation of local services, can be seen as “political”. Government decisions and economic policies have a direct effect on all our members’ jobs and pay prospects as well as on wider industrial relations matters. That is why we must keep the Political Fund.

Unions are the only organisations required by law to have such funds. Business can contribute to political parties and political organisations sympathetic to its interests. Without our fund UNISON would lose its voice in the political sphere.

WHAT DOES SPENDING MONEY ON “POLITICAL PURPOSES” ACTUALLY MEAN?

The law is deliberately very wide. As unions have found to their cost, the legislation can be very loosely interpreted so that many campaigns now fall into this category. NALGO discovered this when its “Make People Matter” campaign, in defence of public services, was stopped by the courts in 1987 because the union did not then have a political fund.

If during an election UNISON spends money on campaigning against government or opposition policies on, for example, relaxation of health and safety protection at work, PFI, lack of equal pay for women or local government contracting out, all this would have to be paid for from a separate political fund.

BUT SHOULDN’T THE UNION CONCENTRATE ON LOOKING AFTER ITS MEMBERS AT WORK

That’s exactly what UNISON does. It negotiates wage rises and improvements in working conditions, and represents members if they’ve been treated unfairly at work. But it can only protect members properly if governments implement decent legislation – and this means political campaigning.

How much UNISON can do for you is affected by:

- Laws that affect pay machinery and collective bargaining
- Legal limits on individual and collective employment rights
- Rules on health and safety at work
- Legal provisions for maternity and paternity rights and pay
- Statutory pension rights
- Legislation on equality issues
Laws protecting part-time workers

Members need laws that protect them. That’s why unions need political funds so that we can influence the drafting of those laws.

European legislation and directives have become more and more important. The Fund works closely with a number of MEPs so that members’ interests are properly represented at European levels too.

**SHOULDN’T THE UNION KEEP OUT OF POLITICS?**

It would be easy if life were that simple but it isn’t.

When most people talk about politics they think only of political parties and of government. But politics in its widest sense affects every aspect of our lives.

Even such an “un-political” activity as going to the doctor or dentist involves political issues; what sort of treatment you get, how much you have to pay, whether there are sufficient staff with the right qualifications to treat you. All these things depend on political decisions and government policies.

UNISON believes in a fair society. It has the interests of its members as well as the interests of people who use public services at heart. It has to get its message across to the decision-makers and decision-formers.

Important issues at work are determined by politics and government legislation. Members may find it hard to understand that basic trade union activities such as protecting you rights, getting better wages or saving jobs are “political” in the eyes of the law.

We must be aware of legislation and what the government or the political parties are doing so that we can make sure our members’ views are properly represented before it is too late. We have to campaign vociferously for things we believe are right and in our members’ interests. We have to talk to politicians and ministers as well as employers BUT we can only do this effectively if we have a political fund.

**DEFENDING MEMBERS’ RIGHTS**

A large amount of UNISON’s day to day campaigning work is paid for from the Political Fund. Some campaigns have a clear political content but others, as we have seen, are less clearly political. So it is a good idea to use actual examples of political fund spending when you are explaining the importance of the ballot to members. Here are some recent examples of how UNISON has used its political fund:

- Promoting and defending public services
- Positively Public Campaign
- Lobbying and campaigning against the two-tier workforce
- Supporting local campaigns against PFI, outsourcing and cuts in services
- Fighting racism and discrimination
- Opposing the BNP in local and European elections
- Campaigning for maternity rights for trainee nurses and midwives
- Defending the National Health Service
- Defending public service pensions
- Promoting training, skills and investment in staff
- Campaigning for improved employment rights
- Supporting devolution in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Greater London and the North of England
- Lobbying for Equal Pay

These campaigns would not have been possible without a political fund.

**DON’T SILENCE YOUR UNION**

We must make sure our union is not silenced. That is why it is vital that members vote in this UNISON ballot on the political fund and give it an overwhelming “yes”. For UNISON to carry out its obligations to its members in the future and to make sure that their views are taken into account by politicians, parties and governments, we need out Political Fund.