

Unite structures and participating

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Why care about the structures?

Our main focus is at workplace level, but structures can help or hinder what you want to do, e.g.:

1. Access to information and resources
2. Networking with other activists
3. Solidarity or coordination
4. Getting press releases out
5. Authorisation for industrial action / ballots
6. Shaping union policy

A multitude of committees can give the appearance of democracy while leaving most power in the hands of union employees and a minority of activists with high facility time who spend more time on committees and with officers and less time organising in workplaces.

Where to find information

1. <https://myunite.unitetheunion.org/login> for details of your branch
2. <https://unitetheunion.org/sitemap/>
3. Google “whatever” site:unitetheunion.org
4. Get a @unitetheunion.org email address via your region – for the address book
5. Unite app includes contact details for regional offices
6. Unite diary
7. <https://unitetheunion.org/who-we-are/structure/>
includes the rulebook and guidance on rules
8. <https://unitetheunion.org/work-voice-pay/> - reps can get login details from their regional office – spreadsheets of workplaces with Unite members
9. Various sector-specific Unite websites
10. <https://resources.unitetheunion.org/policies-and-publications/decisions-of-unite-policy-conference>
11. www.iansunitesite.org.uk – particularly glossary & jargon buster; Unite’s structures

Workplace (rule 18)

Members at every workplace “shall elect from amongst themselves, at least every 3 years, 1 or more of the following representatives”:

- Shop stewards / workplace representatives
- Safety representatives
- Learning representatives
- Equality representatives
- Environmental representatives

Elections held January – March. Can be more frequent than 3-yearly. Can fill vacancies. Varying practices on how elections are run. Should, where practicable, reflect the membership’s gender and ethnic balance.

Must inform the Regional Officer of the election result.

Branches (rule 17)

1. A branch is a grouping of members, not the union office – every member is in a branch
2. “Based on” the workplace, but various types including workplace, employer, sector, national, composite, community, retired member
3. Must notify members (possibly via website) and meet at least quarterly (many meet monthly). Quorum of five.
4. Expected to meet [branch standards](#)
5. Get part of subs (typically 7.5%)
6. Members elect branch executive officers on the same 3-year cycle as workplace reps (but can’t hold elections more frequently) by ballot or show of hands

Rule 6

You can't participate in most of the Unite structures unless you are an "accountable representative of workers" which means a rep in a workplace or a branch officer who is employed by an organisation other than Unite.

There are some exceptions in industries where there is erratic employment, self-employment etc such as construction, and for victimised workers.

If you aren't an accountable representative of workers you can only take part in:

- Your own workplace or branch (including being delegated externally e.g. to a trades council)
- Area Activists Committees
- Regional Labour Party Liaison Committees
- Young members' structures (other than Executive and Regional Committee delegates)

So if you miss the chance to be elected at workplace / branch level you are excluded for three years.

Retired and Community membership

- Members not in paid employment can be Community members.
- There are some retired members who don't pay subs, but they cannot participate in the structures. They can pay Retired Member Plus or Community subs, which are the same.
- Retired members can choose to be in the branch associated with their old employer, a retired members' branch, or a community branch.
- Community structures are in rule 28. Retired members' structures are in rule 10. Both are excluded by Rule 6 from most of the structures.

Proportionality

- All constitutional committees of the union have reserved seats to guarantee at least proportional representation of women and BAEM members.
- On some committees there are also seats reserved for other equality strands.
- Some committees have seats allocated using constituencies to ensure industrial and/or geographic diversity.

Sectors (Rule 7)

1. Members in work are assigned to an industrial sector (currently 19), generally based on their employer rather than occupation.
2. Every three years all accountable representatives of workers can attend a Regional Industrial Sector Conference, which elects a Regional Industrial Sector Committee (RISC), which meets quarterly.
3. RISC members can also be elected via Regional Equality Committees and Youth Committees.
4. The RISC meets quarterly and elects delegates to a National Industrial Sector Committee (NISC) which meets quarterly, to a National Industrial Sector Conference every two years, to the Regional Committee and to Regional Labour Party Liaison Conference every three years.
5. The RISC must be notified of the date of the election and the identity, constituency and contact details of the elected workplace representative (rule 18.7).

Health & Safety (Rule 34)

1. Accredited safety reps can attend an annual Regional Health & Safety Conference
2. Regional Committees (not the conference!) set up Regional Health & Safety Committees
3. Two H&S reps from each region elected to a National Health & Safety Committee which meets annually and reports to the EC
4. National Health & Safety Conference every three years made up from 20 H&S reps from each region

Equalities (rule 11)

1. Equality “strands”: women; Black and Asian ethnic minority (BAEM), disabled, LGBT+
2. Each strand has a Regional Conference every three years, which elects its own Regional Committee
3. Regional equalities committees can elect delegates to RISCs, to the Regional Committee, and to the relevant National Equality Conference (every two years) and National Equality Committee
4. Committees meet quarterly

Young members (rule 9)

1. Up to and including 27 now, 30 from 2021
2. Regional young members' conferences every 3 years, elects the Regional Young Members' Committee and delegates to the Young Members National Committee
3. National Young Members' Conference every two years
4. There are often young member observers at Policy Conference in addition to any delegates
5. Partially exempted from rule 6, have seats on various other committees

Geographical

1. Regions (Rule 8): Ireland; Scotland; Wales; North West; North East, Yorkshire and Humberside; West Midlands; East Midlands; South West; South East; London and Eastern.
2. Regions have funds (up to 1% of subs) and their own Finance & General Purposes Committees.
3. Subdivided into Areas with Area Activist Committees (AACs) elected from Area Activist Conferences once every three years (plus at least 2 seats elected from young members). AACs and (usually) Area Activist meetings are quarterly.
4. Regional Committee with delegates from RISCs, AACs, Regional Equalities Committees, Young Members Committee, plus Retired Member and Community Member observers – meets quarterly.

Scotland (rule 29)

1. Scotland has its own Scottish Executive Committee instead of a Regional Committee
2. Scottish Policy Conference in years when there isn't a Unite Policy Conference

Political

1. Unite has a “political fund” (rule 23). The law on this changed for members who joined from 1 March 2018 from opt-out to opt-in. This is separate from whether people are an Affiliated Supporter (a category of Labour Party member) or a full member
2. Rule 22 sets out a structure of Labour Party Liaison Conferences and Committees
3. Only branch delegates to Constituency Labour Party “General Committees” and Labour Party members elected by Unite committees can take part in the Labour Party Liaison structures.
4. Unlike some unions, the political structures of Unite are supposed to follow policy set by the general structures, rather than being independent, and some decisions are taken by Regional Committees or the Executive Council
5. More info: <https://unitetheunion.org/what-we-do/unite-in-politics/unite-and-the-labour-party/>

Policy and Rules Conferences

1. Policy conference (rule 12) every two years. One delegate per 1300 working members. General policy not solely about one sector. Motions which require spend money (e.g. affiliation) are usually defeated on the grounds these are Executive decisions
2. Rules conference (rule 13) every four years. One delegate per 4000 working members. You can only amend one rule at a time – the Executive “tidies up” other rules affected
3. Delegates from RISCs (sometimes NISCs), national equality committees, Regional Committees, young and retired members
4. Each branch and constitutional committee can submit one motion (and for policy, one amendment)
5. Lots more to know – about Standing Orders, Executive Statements, fringe meetings, Emergency Motions

Executive Council (rule 14)

1. Top body of the union between conferences, quarterly regular meetings, plus special meetings
2. Elected every three years based on sectoral, regional and equality constituencies
3. EC members attend the committee corresponding to their constituency
4. Has a Chair, Vice-Chairs, Finance & General Purposes Committee, Education Committee, International Committee
5. Meetings attended by General Secretary and other senior officers and staff, gets lots of reports, remits/motions
6. EC members make up the panels for appointment of officers

General Secretary (rule 15)

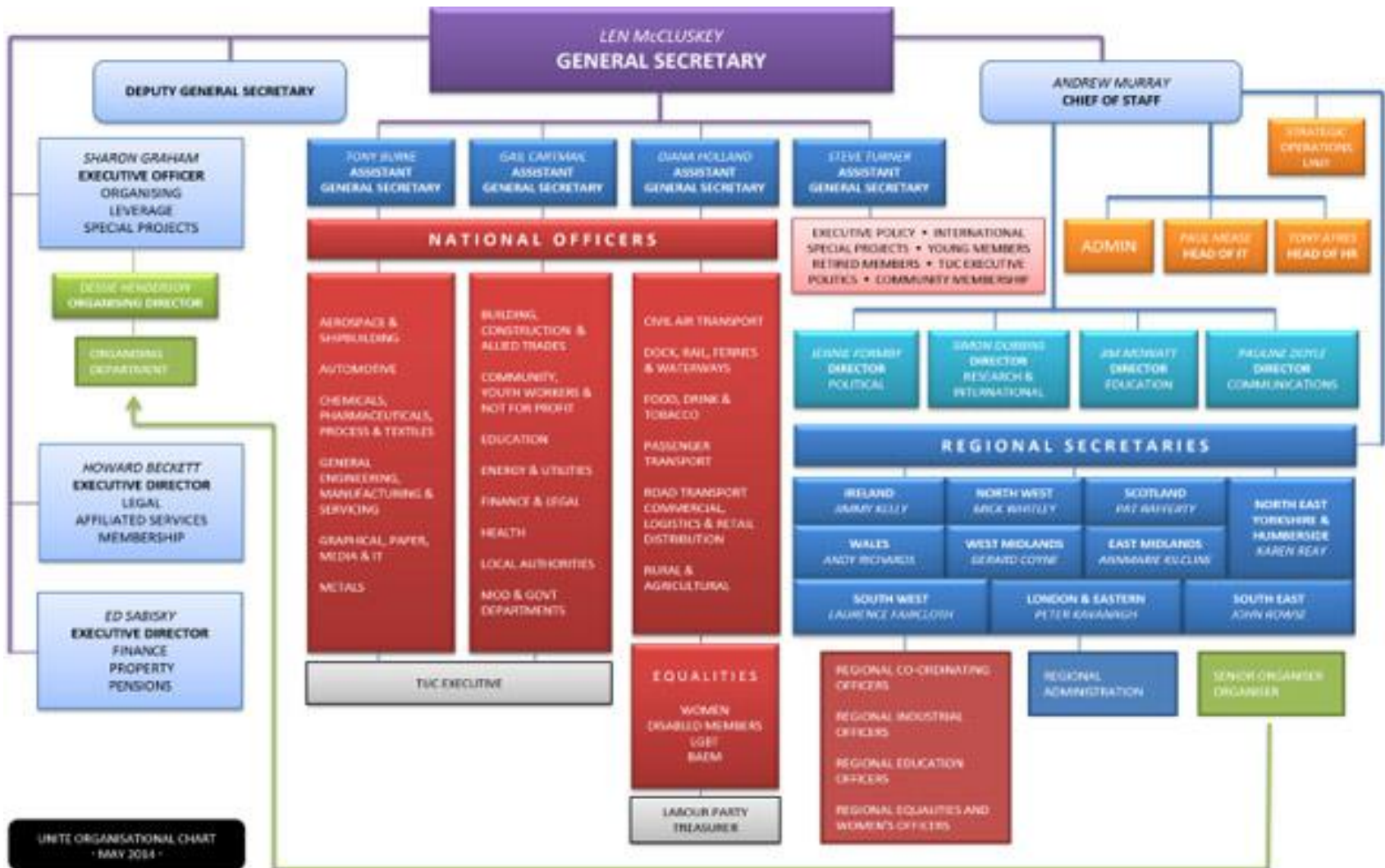
1. Figurehead and top authority in the union between EC meetings – can delegate powers to officers and staff
2. Elected for five year term
3. Manager of all union employees – appoints staff (not officers) and can move officers around
4. Huge powers of patronage
5. Huge influence over the EC and conference

Other union staff

1. Chief of Staff – Andrew Murray
2. Sectors are grouped under Manufacturing, Services and Transport, each under an Assistant General Secretary – National Officers cover sectors and report to them
3. Regional Secretaries have Regional Coordinating Officers (RCOs) who have teams of Regional Officers
4. Organising & Leverage Department under Sharon Graham has parallel structure of organisers. Regions have a Senior Organiser and a team of Organisers.
5. Departments including Legal & affiliate services – including membership (Howard Beckett), Research, Health & Safety, International (Simon Dubbins), Campaigns and Communications (Pauline Doyle), Political (Amy Jackson), Finance, Education (Jim Mowatt), Equalities (Diana Holland)

Organisation chart

This helpful chart isn't up to date in terms of names and roles.



The constitutional timetable

1. Reps and branch officers elected January-March 2022 (postponed from 2021) and every three years
2. Then conferences in every region to elect RISCs, AACs, equality committees etc, along with national equalities conferences
3. Miss steps 1-2 and you are probably shut out for three years (unless you can fill a vacancy)
4. The EC and most committees meet quarterly – there are windows for each type of meeting to minimise clashes (see [constitutional timetable](#))
5. Usually policy conference and sector conferences in alternate years – but Policy Conference didn't happen in 2020
6. GS election 2021
7. EC elections in 2023

Sending motions or remits

1. A motion (or “remit”) can be aimed at a particular body to implement it; go directly to a national conference; or be sent to the EC
2. If a motion is trying to set policy between policy conferences, you need to get it to the EC
3. If a motion is asking a particular body to take action, you need to get it to that body
4. A motion to the EC can go from a reps committee, committee member or branch to:
 - AAC -> Regional Committee -> EC
 - RISC -> Regional Committee -> EC
 - RISC -> NISC -> EC
 - REqC -> NEqC -> EC
5. Lots of opportunities to be blocked, lost or delayed
6. Some regions (e.g. London & Eastern) allow branches to send motions direct to Regional Committee

Networks (not all left)

1. <https://www.uniterankandfile.org/>
2. <https://workersunite.net/>
3. <https://unitedleft.org.uk/>
4. <https://uniteunityleft.co.uk/>
5. <http://unitealliance.org/>