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Basic Income for Net Zero

Trade Union Perspectives

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Contents

- Glossary of trade unions 1
- Summary 2
- Introduction 3
- Existing Trade Union positions and engagement 5
 - General trends 5
 - UK positions 6
 - Current and Historical Support for a Green New Deal within UK trade unions..... 8
 - Previous research by the UBI Lab Network on understanding UBI within trade unions 9
- Methods 11
- Trade Union perspectives- insights from the interviews 13
 - How to Engage Trade Unions 13
 - Support for a UBI 13
 - Summarising concerns and needs 17
 - To support UBI, trade unions need to be convinced in these five areas:..... 17
- An example of how UBI and GND can be integrated: the Quadruple Lock 20
- Conclusion 22
- References 23

Glossary of trade unions

AUE - Actors' Equity Association (or Equity, the UK trade union for professional performers and creative practitioners)

BFAWU - Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union

CFDT - Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (French Democratic Confederation of Labour)

CGT - Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Labour, France)

CWU - Communication Workers Union

DGB - Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (German Trade Union Confederation)

Equity

FBU - Fire Brigades Union

GMB - GMB Union (originally General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union)

MU - Musicians' Union

NAMAWU - Namibian Metal and Allied Workers Union

Napo - the trade union and professional association for family court and probation staff

NEU - National Education Union

NUJ - National Union of Journalists

PCS - Public and Commercial Services Union

POA - The Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers

STUC - Scottish Trades Union Congress

TUC - Trades Union Congress

TUCG - Trade Union Coordinating Group (TUCG)

Writers' Guild

UBS - Universal Basic Services

UCU - University and College Union

UNISON - UNISON

Summary

This report analyses a programme of engagement with UK trade unions on their perspectives on Universal Basic Income (UBI). Many are ‘firefighting’ ongoing crises – pay erosion, workplace disputes, job cuts – and lack time to engage with long-term transformative ideas such as UBI. There is the dual challenge of unions prioritising policy proposals that they believe a Labour government might realistically consider and believing that policy change needs to stem from members. Unions identified six key arguments against UBI:

1. It is not economically feasible
2. It enhances scope for employer exploitation
3. It threatens trade union relevance
4. It could undermine other policies that unions do support, such as Universal Basic Services
5. It may undermine public sector jobs
6. It is subject to misconceptions among members

However, several areas of support for UBI did emerge:

1. It protects against automation and AI
2. It strengthens workers’ bargaining power
3. It supports equality and social mobility
4. It re-opens an ambitious social vision

Unions emphasised several conditions that must be met before taking a definitive pro-UBI stance:

1. Demonstration of economic, labour market and public service feasibility from large trials
2. A clear, credible and progressive funding model
3. Assurance against exploitation
4. Support from members to indicate institutional social feasibility
5. Government interest to indicate political feasibility

Importantly, greater union engagement with a Green New Deal (GND) means that support for UBI can be increased if it can be demonstrated that it supports a just transition.

Introduction

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a periodic, unconditional cash payment, delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-testing or behavioural requirements. The relationship between trade unions and basic income proposals has been complex and contradictory, reflecting fundamental tensions between traditional labour movement priorities and emerging social policy paradigms. Trade unions have historically approached universal basic income with caution, viewing it through the lens of employment relations, wage bargaining, and worker solidarity. Many are ‘firefighting’ ongoing crises – pay erosion, workplace disputes, job cuts – and lack time to engage with long-term transformative ideas such as UBI. There is the dual challenge of unions prioritising policy proposals that they believe a Labour government might realistically consider and believing that policy change needs to stem from members.

However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of including trade unions in the UBI conversation because of their scepticism and their ability to create transformational change. For example, the UBI Lab Network is at the heart of current discussions around Universal Basic Income. It is a decentralised network of individuals and local groups who campaign for a UBI. Now with over 20 ‘Labs’, the UBI Lab Network is global. They are ‘labs’ in that they focus their work on UBI discussions, research and activism from their geographic location. The Network consists of Labs across parts of Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia, but most are based in the UK. The Network also consists of Labs that have no geographical boundaries and whose focus is to examine a UBI from a specific perspective. Often using an intersectional lens, these Labs focus their research, discussion and activism on issues such as food, disability, youth, women, the arts, and other non-geographical issues that could be positively impacted by a UBI.

Therefore, there has been a focus on using an intersectional lens to understand UBI in relation to other topics. This led to the 2022 Basic Income North Conferences in 2022 in Manchester, led by the Network in collaboration with the RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts). This event aimed to be a discussion forum for Basic Income thinkers, political activists and civil society exploring how a basic income could transform the north of England. The success of this inaugural event ensured that the following year, July 2023, the chapter authors (part of the UBI Lab Network), again with support from the RSA, held a follow-up event. This 2023 conference was specifically designed to take a deeper look at many of the issues raised in 2022, notably that of trade union support.

During this conference, the topic of trade union support for a UBI generated a lot of interest and it was decided by the group that a follow-up event focusing just on trade unions and UBI would be a necessary step. The ‘What Could a UBI Do For My Union’ meeting in 2024 invited trade union members, organisers and politicians to discuss how the UBI movement could be championed by the trade union movement and to begin its way into policy. Both events were held as webinars on YouTube. The growing interest from trade union members in the Network, in beginning discussions on UBI within trade unions, has led to this project.

This intersectional approach to UBI has helped connect the idea to specific industries and other connected policies and issues. The issue of economic security is directly linked to tackling climate change. We cannot ignore the necessity of a Green New Deal or of a UBI. To create a fairer and more just world, where people and the environment are protected, economic justice and environmental justice must be explored together. Fundamentally, a UBI will only be successful if it is connected to ideas that protect communities and the environment.

This report presents findings from a programme of engagement with UK trade unions over their prospective pathway to support for UBI in the context of the need to transition to net zero. This report sets out a) the specific reasons that individual trade unions and the TUC hold for objecting to Basic Income; b) their specific positions on a Green New Deal/just transition and, c) the evidential (economic, environmental, public opinion) threshold that is required for them to take a definitive position on basic income i) in general and ii) in relation to a Green New Deal/just transition.

We identify a series of existing positions as well as means of enabling unions to adopt formal positions on the policy. We begin by setting out existing evidence of present positions.

Existing Trade Union positions and engagement

General trends

Trade union responses to UBI are fundamentally shaped by competing visions of labour market organisation and social protection. Groot(1) identifies a central tension between the traditional labour movement emphasis on full employment and the post-industrial recognition that paid work may not be universally available. The power resource theory perspective suggests that workers' bargaining power derives from labour market scarcity and collective organisation.(2) From this viewpoint, unconditional basic income risks weakening labour solidarity by providing an individual rather than collective safety net. Standing argues conversely that UBI could enhance workers' bargaining power by providing an 'exit option' from exploitative employment, though this remains contested.(3)

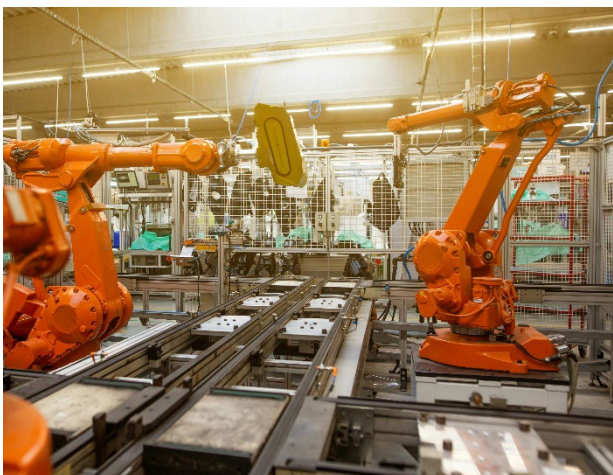
Pulkka conceptualises trade union positions along a spectrum from 'productivist' to 'post-productivist' welfare orientations.(4) Productivist unions prioritise full employment and wage-based social insurance, viewing UBI as antithetical to work-centred solidarity. Post-productivist orientations, more common among the service-sector unions, display greater openness to decoupling income from employment.

Historically, trade union movements in most developed economies have opposed or maintained scepticism towards UBI. Vanderborght and Van Parijs document sustained opposition from major European union confederations throughout the 1980s and 1990s.(5) The adequacy concern centres on whether UBI payments would provide sufficient income security compared to contributory social insurance systems.(6) Unions worry that UBI might subsidise low-wage employers, enabling them to offer inadequate wages knowing that workers receive public income support.(7) Additionally, UBI requires substantial public expenditure, potentially competing with other welfare state priorities.(8)

Continental European trade unions have generally maintained scepticism towards basic income. The German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) has consistently opposed UBI, arguing it conflicts with contribution-based solidarity.(9) French unions display internal divisions, with the more radical CGT showing greater openness while moderate unions like the CFDT maintain reservations.(10) Scandinavian unions have prioritised active labour market policies, though Finnish unions showed cautious interest in basic income experiments.(11)

In Anglo-American contexts, American unions have historically focused on employment-based benefits rather than universal social policies.(12) Canadian labour organisations have engaged more substantively with basic income debates following provincial experiments.(13) Australian unions have maintained distance from basic income advocacy, prioritising minimum wage campaigns and industry-wide bargaining reforms.(14)

The acceleration of automation and platform-based work has prompted some reconsideration of UBI within union circles. Srnicek and Williams argue that technological unemployment threats create new strategic imperatives for labour movements.(15) However, Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek caution that union interest remains limited, with most unions preferring strategies to regulate non-standard work and strengthen collective bargaining frameworks.(16)



Rather than embracing UBI, many unions have advocated alternatives. Participation income requires recipients to engage in socially valuable activities.(17) Job guarantee programmes commit governments to providing employment to all who seek it at decent wages.(18) Working time reduction represents another union-preferred strategy.(19) Enhanced contributory social insurance remains the preferred approach for many traditional unions.(20)

Where unions do express openness towards UBI, this typically involves substantial conditions. Van Parijs and Vanderborght identify common union stipulations including adequate payment levels, preservation of existing social protections, progressive financing and integration with, rather than replacement of collective bargaining.(21)

Some trade unions have engaged directly with basic income pilots. Finnish unions maintained distance from the 2017–2018 experiment while monitoring outcomes.(11) However, the Namibian Basic Income Grant pilot (2008–2009) demonstrated more substantive union involvement, with NAMAWU actively supporting the pilot.(22) The Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration in the USA received support from labour organisations as a means of addressing economic insecurity.(23)

UK positions

UK unions have historically maintained scepticism towards UBI while showing selective engagement with related policies. The TUC explored UBI with the Fabian Society in 2017.(24) They focused on the potential cost of UBI as being impossible to implement, that it supposedly promotes joblessness and it was only analysed in isolation, without looking at UBI as a pillar within holistic systems change. The authors also explain that they believe the current social security system in the UK, Universal Credit, ‘provides a better cushion when earnings fall’. This means they believe it is well designed to respond to the ‘risks of pay stagnation, inequality and insufficient work’. This is a controversial opinion on a social security system that fails individuals and families, through creating stigma, sanctions, complicated processes and a general lack of financial and wellbeing support. Therefore, the TUC has not formally endorsed UBI, with its Commission on Economic Justice concluding in 2018 that job guarantees and enhanced social insurance better addressed worker needs.(25) A more balanced exploration of UBI is required by trade unions in the UK.

Despite a lack of support and exploration on UBI from within trade unions, some have explored it and some unions even endorse it. In 2016, GMB said that a UBI should

replace the benefit system.(26) In 2016, Unite's UBI motion passed at the Trade Union Congress (TUC).(27) The Independent Workers of Great Britain signed the Emergency Basic Income letter (organised by the UBI Lab Network and others) to Chancellor Rishi Sunak in March 2020. In 2017, a UBI motion was proposed at a delegate meeting in the National Union of Journalists.

The Musicians' Union officially supported UBI at their congress in 2021 and has continued to campaign for the idea.(28) Equity endorsed a Basic Income Guarantee for creative workers in 2020.(29) Since then, it is now Equity policy to support UBI, arising from their democratic policy-making processes. They have also called for the Welsh Basic Income Care Leavers Pilot to be extended to creative workers. The Artists' Union England submitted a motion on UBI at TUC Congress in 2021, which was amended by the Public and Commercial Services Union to be more sceptical of UBI's potential benefits.(30)

In a reflection of partial support for UBI, GMB's 2024 National Policy Guide says:

We believe that a Universal Basic Income has the potential to offer genuine social security to all while boosting the economy and creating jobs. GMB is committed to campaign for a Universal Basic Income for all citizens.... GMB believes that Universal Basic Income cannot be an attack on social security. We call for the TUC to be more vocal in its support for UBI, while recognising that more work needs to be done to adequately identify the additional funding required for a decent level of basic income and that the top priority for an incoming Labour government must be to rebuild our public services from the wreckage of Tory austerity.(31)

There are several factors to understand union scepticism on basic income in the UK. First, the National Health Service and universal public services represent the labour movement's preferred model of decommodification through services rather than cash. Second, the universal credit experience has generated union wariness about welfare simplification.(32) Third, declining union density creates strategic imperatives around organisation and membership growth. Fourth, any realistic UK basic income would likely be modest, potentially insufficient for genuine income security.(33)

Despite general scepticism, UK-based basic income advocacy has emerged from civil society organisations. The RSA published influential basic income research.(34) Compass has advocated for basic income trials while acknowledging union concerns.(35) The Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) has shown greater openness to experimentation than the TUC, supporting pilot feasibility studies in Fife and Glasgow.(36)

Trade union perspectives on UBI reveal fundamental tensions within contemporary labour movements about work, distribution, and solidarity. While historically sceptical, unions increasingly engage with basic income debates, particularly regarding automation and precarity. However, this engagement rarely translates into unconditional support, with unions typically preferring alternatives including job guarantees, working time reduction, and enhanced social insurance. Union positions reflect legitimate concerns about adequacy, labour market effects, welfare state retrenchment, and collective organisation.

In the UK specifically, union scepticism reflects both international patterns and distinctive national factors, including the NHS model of decommodification, universal credit's problematic implementation, declining union density, and liberal welfare state constraints. For UBI to gain substantial union support, proposals would need to guarantee adequate payment levels, preserve existing protections, secure progressive financing, work alongside stable employment and complement rather than replace collective bargaining. Whether such conditions prove achievable remains uncertain, ensuring that trade union–basic income relations will continue generating debate within labour movements and social policy scholarship.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted renewed UK union engagement with income security questions, with unions supporting expanded furlough schemes.(37) Recent UK union policy development increasingly emphasises 'just transition' frameworks addressing environmental transformation and automation, typically prioritising green job creation over basic income provision.(38) Looking forward, UK union perspectives will likely remain contested, influenced by automation trajectories, welfare state developments, and political opportunities.

Current and Historical Support for a Green New Deal within UK trade unions

The focus of this project is to understand the support for UBI within trade unions, in relation to a Green New Deal (GND). We will not mention all the support there is for GND within trade unions, as it is not the primary focus of this report There is much more support for a GND than for a UBI:

Firstly, the TUCG created a list of demands in 2022 on climate and jobs:(39)

- Green jobs must be skilled, well-paid, safe and secure
- Public ownership and investment must play a central role in sectors such as energy and transport, as well as in supporting the transition across other sectors to progress adaptation to climate change
- Education and training must be universal and central to developing and enhancing learning and skills to support workers through the changes required by the climate crisis
- Sustainability and environmental education must be embedded throughout the curriculum
- Workers must have direct involvement in decisions about changes to production and services, and in processes to determine what a genuinely Just Transition looks like



This is significant because it shows that the BFAWU, Equity, FBU, NAPO, NEU, NUJ, PCS, POA, RMT, UCU and URTU all support some form of a Green New Deal. Among other unions, the NUJ passed a disinvestment motion and focused on work to tackle the climate emergency.(40) Other examples include 2026 being Unison's year of green activity,(41) Equity's Green New Deal Network,(42) UCU's Green New Deal negotiations and green reps(43) and TUC's commitment to a Green New Deal, including the support for 'Greener Workplaces for a Just Transition'.(44) Meanwhile, the CWU has supported a Green New Deal since 2010, BFAWU oppose fracking, GMB supports its energy sector workers, whilst keeping in mind climate goals and the MU engages with sustainable touring.(45)

Previous research by the UBI Lab Network on understanding UBI within trade unions

As mentioned above, the Network hosted the events, 'Unions and UBI: Basic Income North' in 2023(46) and 'What Could a UBI Do for My Union' in 2024.(47) These events created conversations with trade union members. The participants from various trade unions set out key arguments for why trade unions do not support UBI, why they should, what the internal barriers within trade unions are and how they can be convinced. In 'What Could a UBI Do For My Union' (2024), John McDonnell MP explained the trade unions' role in wider social change:

Some trade unions saw this as part of their role in terms of protecting their members and transforming society. But there is another group, who are basically saying you are undermining the role of trade unions, as our main role is hard negotiations around wages. We had the same tussle over child benefit. The argument was put then that introducing a free benefit to everybody undermines trade unions' ability to negotiate (John McDonnell MP, 2024, 11:00-12:57).

Despite this divide over the purpose of trade unions, there are good reasons as to why UBI and GND should be explored by trade unions:

Deep in the heart of trade unionism, is about how we can ensure that working people have a decent living standard... as time has gone on, it is also about that everyone in society has the basics of a decent quality of life... UBI can achieve that. UBI provides an immense amount of freedom. UBI gives that ability to have a foundation upon which one withdraws one labour, you are not implicated into poverty. I think it is at the core of trade unions (John McDonnell MP, 2024 2:54-4:45).

These discussions showed us how there are many barriers to exploring these policies, from constant firefighting to the fact that:

Within many trade unions there are barriers to even having these conversations in an in-depth and exploratory way. We haven't had a big debate on it (Vicky Blake, UCU, 2024, 16:24- 16:50)

Despite these barriers to having a conversation on UBI, there would be many benefits for trade unions with the implementation of a UBI:

A Universal Basic Income would mean a lot. Firstly, it would give musicians time to prioritise their job as a musician without the pressure of doing a second, third, and often fourth, minimum wage job alongside creative work in order to survive' (Maddy Radcliff, Musicians' Union, 2023; 32:22 - 32:35).

A basic income would essentially strengthen collective bargaining [...] you know that you've got this safety net essentially to fall back on [...] I think it allows people not to be frightened to go on strike' (Jonathan Rhys Williams, Altra Law and formerly GMB, 2023, 27:55 - 28:26).

A key argument made in these sessions was that we need to engage with the grassroots within trade unions. A model for this could be the 'Labour For a New Democracy' campaign, which grew support for proportional representation through passing many CLP motions supported by members in multiple trade unions. In addition, we need to engage with the government, MPs, mayors and councils because trade unions are less likely to engage in ideas that elected officials will not consider. Both arguments were apparent throughout our meetings with trade union leaders and policy officers.



Methods

This study was conducted via semi-structured interviews with trade union leaders and policy officers. We approached the interviews with structured questions, but allowed the conversations to flow when necessary to allow for key patterns in the conversations to form naturally. This informal style made it easier to engage with trade union leaders and officers, as they might stick to agreed lines rather than opinions, in a more formal setting. Therefore, we were able to gather not just policy information, but the opinions of the interviewees on where their trade union membership stands on UBI and in relation to a GND.

Identifying the reasons for opposition is crucial to developing research that opponents of basic income can sympathise with. This is why understanding not just official policy, but opinions and assumptions is important. Some interviews were with trade unions that support UBI. Most of the interviews were done with trade union policy officers and/or general secretaries who were somewhat open to UBI but sceptical. In some of the interviews, we agreed on the next steps to begin a conversation in their trade union on UBI in relation to a GND. The interviewees understood how UBI related to a GND, despite most not seeing UBI as a necessity. Support for a GND was unanimous.

We explained both ideas in the context of the 'Quadruple Lock' as explained in 'Act Now' by Common Sense Policy Group.(48,49) This was so the interviewees understood the wider context and how both ideas fit within systems change. Our findings were recorded over Microsoft Teams and Zoom, with notes taken during the interviews. These interviews happened between June 2025 and November 2025, with most interviews taking place before October.

The following unions participated fully in the consultation process:

Artists' Union England (AUE): Executive Committee members

Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU): A general secretary, Director of UNITY Consulting Scotland and Birkbeck, University of London)

GMB: London Region officer and policy officer

Musicians' Union (MU): General Secretary

National Union of Journalists (NUJ): Communications officer

Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS): Head of bargaining

Trade Union Congress (TUC): Policy lead and senior economist

Trade Union Coordinating Group (TUCG): a lead TUCG organiser

Unison: policy leads

University and College Union (UCU): Bargaining and communications officers

The following responded, but did not participate in the full process:

Equity: provided information on current support by Head of Policy and Public Affairs

Fire Brigades Union: did not want to meet due to not having a policy on UBI, but discussed UBI in 2018, took a motion on GND to the 2019 Labour Conference, but have not organised around GND since

Napo—the trade union and professional association for family court and probation staff: no policy on either and too busy to meet

The Communication Workers Union: have not explored the idea of UBI but supports a GND in general

The Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional and Secure Psychiatric Workers: not a current POA priority

Writers' Guild: Showed willingness to meet, but a meeting did not occur. WGGB General Secretary Ellie Peers has said they would like the government to explore 'models like Universal Basic Income or introducing tailored grants for creative workers'.(50)

Other trade unions were contacted, but did not reply.

Trade Union perspectives- insights from the interviews

How to Engage Trade Unions

There was a difference of opinion on how to increase discussion on UBI within trade unions. On one side, it was seen that the change would have to come from trade union members for unions to explore UBI in greater numbers. An example of this is 'Labour For a New Democracy', which built up support from the grassroots within Labour-affiliated trade unions, eventually passing a motion at Labour Party Conference in support of proportional representation.⁽⁵¹⁾ The MU representative supported this view, suggesting that greater support for UBI must happen through members, as it did within the MU itself. There is a practical element to this. For example, Unison's representatives were keen to explore it but said it must be brought up by the members first. NUJ and UCU expressed that it is not possible to do further research on UBI without some support for it from their members. All this means that many unions could not give us an official position on UBI, as they represent the trade unions' official policy. Unions are democratic organisations and therefore, most of our conversations were on possible reasons for and against UBI that members might have.

Further to this, it was clear that, despite there being objections, the most significant reason for the lack of exploration in UBI within trade unions is that they do not prioritise discussing transformative and holistic ideas for a better society. As a coordinator for the TUCG in Parliament said, unions are constantly firefighting and do not have much time to explore ideas for a more just world. The other side to this is that trade unions, especially Labour-affiliated trade unions, want to influence government policy. They will often only explore policies which they think the government will consider. This is why the Unison policy officers we spoke to said that we need to convince the government to explore UBI for trade unions to be fully interested in it. We need both greater support from members and elected officials for trade unions to explore UBI's potential in greater detail.

Support for a UBI

The interviewees provided many reasons why trade unions should support a UBI. One of the most important reasons that was mentioned is the threat of AI to jobs and how UBI can provide individuals with stability in case of redundancies. The MU representative stated that AI is already causing issues for musicians and could diminish their incomes. Creatives are already in a precarious situation, but with the threat of AI, the need for a stable income would be even more necessary. Many musicians earn only £20,000 a year, have no savings, must do other jobs to fund their creative work and struggle to afford the cost of touring. But more than providing a safety net, a UBI could create more equality of opportunity in the music industry. If the UBI were substantial enough and there were other policies in place to create more opportunities for musicians, it could give working-class individuals more time to develop their art, without having to do multiple temporary jobs. Roughly 40% of the NUJ's members are freelance, meaning that the security of UBI would appeal to many in the trade union. They would be able to pay additional expenses, such as union membership, much more easily. Creative unions and those with many members who are freelance or

temporary staff (such as the UCU) were very concerned about the threat of AI and understood how a UBI could provide a safety net for their members.

BFAWU's support for UBI has strengthened in recent years, citing the Welsh Basic Income Young Care Leavers trial as a reason. No major debates on UBI have occurred recently, but the feeling was that if it were discussed more in the union, there would be greater vocal support for the policy. PCS also do not have a formal position on UBI, but the feeling was that the union is sympathetic to the idea. The union is focused on defending its members' economic positions and workplace rights. UBI could fit into this by securing members' economic positions and providing a strike fund to improve workplace rights. UBI appealed to the interviewees as a policy that can help us dream big again, as a counter to austerity, which has forced trade unions onto the defensive. There was personal admiration from one of the policy officers for how a UBI would support women, especially in helping individuals get out of abusive relationships. A representative from GMB's London Region expressed principled but cautious support for UBI due to its potential to reduce poverty and empower workers.

Reasons to Not Support a UBI

The evidence from our interviews suggests that a large barrier to trade union support and exploration of UBI is not always one based on principle and ideology, but rather because they are focused on firefighting current issues to protect their members' working rights. For example, the interviewees representing BFAWU suggested that trade unions are focused on survival and on what is deemed politically feasible.

This argument aligns with the conclusions reached by trade union members in our previous online sessions. Most trade unions do not provide a space for their members to discuss these issues. At the same time, there is little appetite to explore ideas for a more just world because on the whole trade unions have reaffirmed their role as protecting their members, rather than striving for all of society to be fairer and more equal. When Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader in 2015, trade unions began to explore ideas like UBI once again. For example, Unite tabled a motion on UBI at the TUC Congress. This interest peaked again at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, but the defensive mindset of trade unions that austerity caused has returned since the rise in the cost of living. This argument is underlined by how many trade unions do not have a policy position on UBI, such as the NUJ, UCU, PCS and Unison. We must engage with both policy officers and trade union members to begin these conversations on UBI.

The participants from GMB made it clear that an unfeasible funding plan, further exploitation and complete welfare replacement were still concerns. It would need to be funded through mechanisms that support redistribution, such as a robot or automation tax and it would have to complement public services. UBI should be seen as a citizen's right to live, not as a replacement and simplification for all social welfare. The participant from the GMB policy team added that employers might use UBI to justify offering lower wage increases, weakening collective bargaining. A UBI would affect labour relations and we need to know what the most significant changes would be to prevent exploitation. They expressed the importance of Basic Income trials, but evidence should show the effect of UBI on workers and more specifically, on trade union members.

Despite BFAWU's general support of UBI, the participants raised potential concerns for their members. Concerns over the feasibility of UBI due to funding concerns and the tension between UBI and Universal Basic Services (UBS) were key arguments for possible scepticism. To counter these arguments, we need to explain that there are fundable models of UBI and that UBI is complementary, not adversarial to UBS. BFAWU also explained that workers often see reduced hours, such as the 4-day work week initiatives and assume that they will earn less. Reframing how workers view their work is significant if we are to convince them of the benefits of UBI. This is because, like the 4 Day Week, many workers see UBI as a threat, not a boost to their wages and well-being.

The MU interviewee also suggested possible reasons why members might not support UBI. For example, some musicians might not need it more than other musicians, record labels might take advantage and it could mean a lack of other necessary measures, such as minimum rates for creatives. To counter these arguments, we can explore how rich individuals would pay back their UBI in taxes and how it could be funded to create redistribution. We need to embed UBI in wider systems change thinking to explain that UBI requires other policies, such as minimum rates for the self-employed, such as artists, to be a successful policy. This includes making sure workers are not exploited through UBI by large corporations, something trade unions worry about because of how corporations consistently exploit workers to make larger profits.

Unison and UCU policy officers shared the concern that employers could exploit workers who have a UBI, if they concluded that workers are no longer precarious and can be exploited further. This worry is due to the experience of trade unions with other policies. Unison policy officers agreed that trade unions have lost the 'big dream' because of having to fight this exploitation, leading to pessimism about policies that could create fairer working conditions and a more just society. UCU policy officers shared a similar opinion.

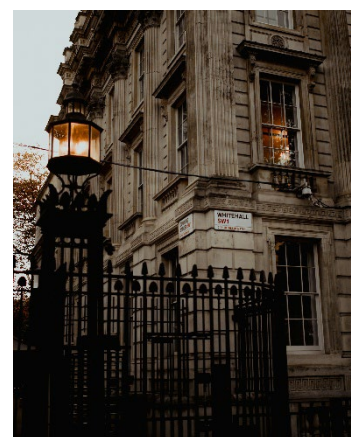
There is also a concern that a UBI could diminish the role of trade unions. We argue that UBI can strengthen trade union membership by providing extra income to strike and to pay member fees. On the other side, there is a concern that UBI is a market-based solution and undermines the collective, such as trade unions. The UCU policy officers said that this leads to thinking that UBI would diminish other support, making working conditions worse as the government looks to cut their spending. This shows that it is important to situate UBI as a key pillar within a discussion of what is needed for systems change. There is also a worry about the unpredictable effects of UBI on the economy, leading to many not wanting to risk further potential economic issues. That's why a UBI should be implemented carefully within a greater vision. It should be noted that the implementation of the child benefit in the UK and the minimum wage elsewhere created previous fears that wages would decrease due to these universal policies. The worries around a UBI are fairly similar to the worries expressed by trade unions over child benefit. Ultimately, a fairer and more just society will only happen through innovative and bold socio-economic policy.

These concerns represent a pessimism within trade unions about policies that work towards a more just society because they are constantly battling exploitation and have little confidence in the government's ability to create fair and just change. This shows how important it is to begin conversations within trade unions on what we need for a more just world, to provide individuals with hope.

Evidential threshold that is required for the unions to take a definitive position on Basic Income

For trade unions to be convinced that UBI is worth pursuing, it needs to be demonstrated at scale and to be seen as feasible. For example, whilst PCS have not embraced UBI, they seem open to being convinced by it through the demonstration of its feasibility and necessity. This is a common theme amongst trade unions. Despite the heap of evidence that Basic Income works, it is often demonstrated at a small scale, where it is hard to see how it would interact with other policies. It has been rarely demonstrated as a 'universal' policy and often for a short period of time. In addition, there has only ever been one Basic Income trial in the UK, so it needs to be demonstrated closer to home for trade unions to be more likely to be convinced of its potential. Trade union members might see where the benefits are with UBI, but there is a worry that it could create further exploitation if implemented poorly.

This pessimism, which is how many voters view British politics currently, is not necessarily unfounded. For example, many PCS members are in the DWP. Therefore, there is a worry about what would happen to their jobs. BFAWU expressed concern that a UBI could benefit landlords and large companies without addressing issues like high rents and supermarket dominance. If UBI were to become policy, it would need to be sensitive to the wider system and include additional policies to safeguard workers. Therefore, not only do we need to demonstrate UBI at a larger scale and closer to trade unions, but we must also explain how a UBI is a part of systems change and will not be implemented on its own.



However, with the threat of AI, the policy officers did accept that many jobs could disappear a lot sooner before UBI becomes a reality. AI is a major concern for trade unions. It was clear that it is not necessarily the policy officers who need to be convinced, but the members of trade unions. BFAWU, NUJ, UCU and Unison participants all explained that it is members who need to be convinced of UBI's feasibility for trade unions to explore it. The BFAWU representative explained that members need to be convinced that UBI will not make work obsolete. It could be argued that this is less about evidence and more about creating captivating narratives that are evidence-based. Which is why BFAWU mentioned how it is important for the public to learn about the economy, to better challenge misconceptions around not just UBI, but fiscal budgets, taxes and bonds. Without this, it is hard to challenge misconceptions of UBI being 'unrealistic'.

As Unison is a large trade union, its members are a good example of current public attitudes around means-testing and government borrowing. Work needs to be done to change perceptions on topics that directly shape whether we see UBI as feasible or unaffordable. For example, we discussed how targeted benefits are still mostly regarded as more efficient than universal benefits. Focusing on the steps towards a UBI and demonstrating the benefits of universal payments, such as paid time off for volunteering, can help move trade union members in this direction. Overall, we need to engage trade union members where they are, whilst engaging parliament to build public support and demonstrate the potential of UBI.

Support for Universal Basic Income in relation to a Green New Deal

Trade unions have engaged much more with GND than with UBI. They are broadly supportive of environmental action when it is tied to a just transition, which includes job security and fair pay. But for a GND to be supported by trade unions, it must be focused on creating decent work and protecting workers, whilst helping them to transition to greener jobs. PCS and GMB participants emphasised the importance of retraining, but that workers must be protected within this green transition to make it just and fair. As mentioned in a previous section, climate reps and workplace environmental policies are becoming a regular occurrence in unions, such as the NUJ, UCU and PCS. In general, the interviewees agreed that a UBI must be practical, support work and increase workers' rights. Placing a UBI within a GND framework could make this more likely. Despite GND having much more momentum than UBI, interviewees agreed that a UBI could be transformative if it were placed within a broader framework to support work and the environment. Trade unions recognised UBI's potential to support a green transition, especially amid AI's rise. However, more evidence is needed to show how exactly a UBI could support a just transition, such as its benefits of acting as a safety net to protect livelihoods during a green transition.

Summarising concerns and needs

We have summarised Union perspectives on concerns and needs in table 1.

Table 1. Summary of union perspectives

Concerns	Needs
Feasibility	Proof of affordability, realism, and economic sustainability.
Funding Plan	Transparent, progressive model (tax reform, automation taxes).
Workplace Impact	Guarantees it complements, not undermines, jobs and bargaining.
Democratic Mandate	Member-driven interest and motions, not top-down advocacy.
Empirical Evidence	Solid data from pilots in Wales, Ireland, etc.
Policy Integration	Alignment with UBS, GND, rent control, fair work agenda.
Sector Fit	Tailored relevance to specific union industries.
Education	Training and materials for reps; open forums for debate.
Ongoing Collaboration	Continued partnership and honest evidence sharing.

To support UBI, trade unions need to be convinced in these five areas:

1. Feasibility

Proof of affordability, realism, and economic sustainability.

TUC policy officer- 'Unions will only progress UBI if members bring motions to Congress... but only if it's seen as realistic and not 'pie in the sky'.

Across almost every union, the dominant requirement is proof that UBI is economically and politically viable:

- UBI must be shown to work at scale, not just in small pilots.
- Unions want evidence that it can be funded sustainably without harming public services, wages, or collective bargaining.
- They see current pilots (e.g. Wales for care leavers, Ireland for artists, potential Manchester pilots) as crucial sources of learning.
- Practical design details matter: who receives it, how much, and how it interacts with taxes, wages, and welfare systems.

2. Attached to a Clear Funding Plan

Transparent, progressive model (tax reform, automation taxes).

- Opposition to UBI if it means cuts to existing welfare or public services.
- Progressive taxation and automation or robot taxes are seen as potential funding routes (mentioned by GMB, Bakers).
- The UBI movement needs to address perceptions that it is a subsidy to landlords or employers if rents and wages are not controlled alongside it.
- Linking UBI to wealth taxes, environmental levies, or corporate taxation could increase credibility among policy officers.

3. That it compliments work and collective bargaining

Guarantees it complements, not undermines, jobs and bargaining. It must be embedded in wider systems change and other similar transformational policies.

UBI must support, not replace, good work and fair wages:

- Fear that employers could misuse UBI to justify lower pay, precarious contracts, or reduced benefits (UCU, Unison, GMB).
- Desire to ensure that UBI strengthens workers' bargaining power, rather than weakening union leverage.
- Preference for framing UBI as a 'complement to decent jobs', offering security between contracts or supporting retraining.
- Preferred framing: UBI as part of a 'new social contract' alongside collective bargaining rights, rent controls, Universal Basic Services (UBS) and of course green and digital transition plans.

4. That it has both trade union grassroots support and support within government

Member-driven interest and motions, not top-down advocacy.

Policy must originate from members, not leadership:

- Most union officers interviewed stressed that leadership can't create policy without member motions.
- Therefore, grassroots education and mobilisation are essential.

Members must feel that UBI:

- Addresses their immediate needs (job security, cost of living, automation fears).
- Is relevant to their sector (e.g. freelancers, creatives, public sector).

5. Clear evidence on benefits for workers from Basic Income pilots and trials

Wales (Care Leavers) and Ireland (Artists) pilots were seen as important test cases.

- Unions want honest evaluations, not just advocacy materials.

UBI activists should present:

- Outcomes on health, poverty, productivity, and wellbeing.
- Impacts on labour markets and inequality.

To progress UBI within trade unions, advocates must:

- Build grassroots support and provide ongoing collaboration
- Empower members and build educational resources to explain UBI and economic realities
- Demonstrate credible funding models
- Embed UBI within broader systems change and tailor evidence to specific industries
- Gain political interest to legitimise the conversation

Only through these combined pathways can unions meaningfully evaluate UBI's role in shaping a just transition and a more secure future of work

An example of how UBI and GND can be integrated: the Quadruple Lock

The findings above emphasise the need for UBI to be designed as a substantive, feasible, affordable and popular vehicle for systems change, including supporting a transition to net zero. The Common Sense Policy Group's Green New Deal, which was developed with Green Party Leader, Zack Polanski, does this.⁽⁴⁸⁾ It represents a comprehensive sustainability transition programme designed to address the climate emergency while protecting workers' interests. The plan recognises that environmental transformation can only succeed if it advances rather than threatens employment security, rejecting the false dichotomy between environmental protection and workers' welfare that has undermined previous climate initiatives.

Central to the Green New Deal is a 'quadruple lock' protecting the 260,000 workers in carbon-intensive industries who will lead the transition. This unprecedented protection mechanism comprises four elements that guarantee workers will not bear the costs of decarbonisation.



The transition job guarantee ensures all workers whose jobs are lost to decarbonisation receive employment at the same or higher salary and seniority level within 50 miles of their current workplace. This protects both career development and community stability, preventing the displacement that has devastated communities during previous industrial transitions. Workers in North Sea fossil fuel extraction, for example, would face no substantive disruption to their lives or careers.

Strategic investment in sites of transition commits to locating publicly owned energy generation and infrastructure in areas currently dependent on high-carbon employment. Regions like Aberdeenshire would remain energy production hubs, revitalising communities that otherwise face economic collapse as fossil fuel extraction ends.

The education and skills guarantee provide bespoke co-produced vocational training and higher apprenticeships through further and higher education, equipping workers with skills for the expanded renewable sector. Only publicly funded skills development can deliver the workforce transformation required.

Finally, the enterprise safety net – the basic income policy detailed elsewhere in their programme – enables workers to leverage their transferable skills by creating new enterprises. This provides workers with opportunities currently available only to the wealthy, correcting the unfairness whereby 'socialism for the rich' allows wealthy individuals to take entrepreneurial risks while workers lack such freedom.

Beyond worker protection, the Green New Deal encompasses transformative environmental policies. The plan commits £28 billion annually to decarbonising and expanding energy supply through renewable sources, matching Labour's abandoned 2021 pledge. New licences for coal, oil and gas extraction would end immediately, with a complete transition to renewables within two to three years.

The National Building Service would retrofit housing stock to modern energy efficiency standards, making heat pumps and solar panels mandatory in new developments while training workers in sustainable construction. Environmental land management schemes would replace intensive agriculture subsidies, prioritising nature regeneration over extraction. Marine protected areas would be established to allow ecosystem recovery while maintaining fishing industry viability.

Progressive taxation mechanisms, including carbon taxes and fossil fuel company excess taxes, would fund the transition while disincentivising polluting activities. Crucially, the plan integrates with public ownership of energy and water utilities, ensuring democratic control enables long-term sustainable planning rather than short-term profit maximisation.

The quadruple lock demonstrates how we can frame UBI as feasible and desirable within systems change. It shows that environmental transformation can be worker-led and democratically controlled, placing trade union representation at the heart of governing boards in the newly public energy sector. This comprehensive protection framework represents a fundamental re-conception of 'just transition', ensuring that those whose labour-built carbon-intensive industries are protected, empowered and central to creating the sustainable economy Britain requires.

Conclusion

The study shows that, while trade unions broadly support Green New Deal principles, UBI remains a contentious policy requiring substantial evidence, member mobilisation and political legitimacy. Most objections stem not from ideological disagreement but from concerns about feasibility, funding, the potential for employer abuse and the risk of undermining existing services or union power. However, growing threats from AI, rising precarity and a desire to re-imagine social security create significant opportunities for engagement. Placing UBI within systems change thinking, whether alongside or within a Green New Deal make the idea much more desirable for trade union members. UBI implemented on its own could be seen as a tool for further exploitation and it will be most effective when connected to other policies for a fairer and more just world. Embedding it within the context of a just transition is key.

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