

Campaign for real trade union education

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Members of NEU, UCU, NUS, NUJ, RMT and UCATT met on 23rd March when Norwich and District Trades Union Council (NDTC) held a learning and education session titled 'Union Learning After the Demise of Unionlearn' at the University of East Anglia. A presentation by General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) general secretary Gawain Little was included. By the end of the afternoon a campaign for real trade union education with a clear message that something bigger and braver than Unionlearn was possible was born.

Unionlearn is the cornerstone of the TUC's learning, skills and training programmes. However, the Union Learning Fund (ULF), which has helped hundreds of thousands of workers on their learning journey with the support of over 40,000 Union Learning Reps (ULRs) working voluntarily to make a real difference within their workplaces, was closed in 2021. Since then the wider activities of Unionlearn have ground to a halt in most parts of the country.

NDTC has set itself a challenge. That challenge is to build a campaign to keep some kind of trade union education programme beyond the narrowest and most functional forms of training in Norwich and, through collaboration with the other three county trades councils, across Norfolk.

The event on 23rd March is a first step on this road and, at the very least, we need to have an action plan that NDTC and the other Norfolk trades councils can sign up to, and which can win the backing of as many union branches as possible. To achieve this, we will need to address Unionlearn's main functions and to find ways to protect and also to develop these in a local context and beyond.

Now the hard work begins of building a union education project that goes beyond the narrow and functional, albeit important, training for reps, for shop stewards and around health and safety, while connecting also to historical and class contexts and rooting itself in political economy.