



Public Pays for Resistance to Cuts

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AN investigation has revealed that trade unions have a 2,500-strong army of representatives campaigning against the government's efficiency drive during paid time off from their normal work at councils, quangos and other public sector bodies. A new report estimates the amount spent on union activity from state funds at £85m in the past year.

The union officials work in government departments, hospitals, mental health trusts and emergency services across the country. Many of the unions that have benefited most from public money gave substantial sums to Labour's election fund.

The study, compiled from data released under freedom of information laws after requests by the Taxpayers' Alliance (TPA), identified £18.3m of "direct payments" made to unions from the Department for Business and other public sector bodies. The money took the form of grants and fees for goods and services.

Among the quangos with the highest number of union representatives is HM Revenue & Customs, where the full-time equivalent of 213 union officials operate at public expense. Taxpayers are funding the union work of 191 union officials at the Department for Work and Pensions and 140 at the Ministry of Defence, where ministers are drawing up plans for cuts to the armed services.

In total, the equivalent of 2,493 full-time public-sector employees did work for trade unions at taxpayers' expense in 2009-10, including 611 in Whitehall departments. The TPA says this cost the exchequer £67.5m.

There is no statutory obligation to pay the salaries of union representatives when they are on union duties, and many of the 1,200 public bodies surveyed did not do so.

Emma Boon, campaign manager of the TPA, said: "The government has to make cuts to pay down the deficit and get the public services back in shape. But now we find that taxpayers are paying the salaries of this mass of people who will be organising strikes and other campaigns against these cuts."

The TPA's inquiry revealed that across England in 2009-10 there were 812 union officials working inside town councils at public expense; 130 working in hospitals; 64 in mental health trusts; 43 working for ambulance services; and 40 at fire and rescue stations.



Eight unions received more than £500,000 from the Department for Business's Union Learning Fund, which gives grants to improve education programmes in the workplace. The GMB and Unite, two unions that have given millions to Labour in recent years, received £1.5m and £1.7m from the fund in 2009-10.

The payment of union reps from public funds frees up the unions to spend large sums on political campaigns, such as strikes over proposed cuts to salaries and pensions.

Business leaders attacked the system. Paul Winter, chief executive of Corpra, the management consultants, said: "I think the average taxpayer would be staggered to know that not only do unions resist changes that might improve the services offered to the public, but we are paying for them to do so."

The business department said its union funding was "aimed at delivering greater productivity, more effective workplace practices and a highly trained and motivated workforce".

