

When I was unlucky enough to experience the complaints procedure, I had not expected, despite being completely exonerated, to suffer a penalty of not being able to earn my living for 3 months. The system was far from coordinated or transparent and left me isolated. It was a painful reminder of how exposed and vulnerable intermediaries are, and independent advice was hard to find, not to mention the potential financial cost.

Now, as a trustee of IfJ, (and probably because of my own experience), I have been listening to members' increasing concerns about a lack of support, conditions imposed on our working, the complaints procedure as well as wider issues about the justice system itself involving cuts in legal aid, delays arranging trials, delayed payments and behaviour towards professionals in court, to name a few.

I am very aware that we have no formal support or advice line; there seems to be confusion whether being a member of a professional body – RCSLT, for example - would provide support when a member is working not as a SLT but as an intermediary.

I looked for an alternative group and found **Legal Sector Workers United (LSWU)**, recently founded to represent a range of workers in the legal system e.g. paralegals, barristers, court officials, solicitors, cleaners, Citizens Advice, all the groups with whom we share our workplace – the courtroom and the justice system.

At a recent IfJ trustee meeting we had a presentation from representatives of LSWU and United Voices of the World (UVW) the umbrella union which was recently successful in getting 1500 porters and security staff taken in-house at Imperial NHS, so they now receive a living wage, sickness benefit etc..

LSWU/UVW offers legal advice, employment law training and representation at disciplinary proceedings from day one. They recognise that the legal sector and those working within it are getting squeezed more and more and consequently, we risk not being able to support the very people who depend on us.

To quote Michael Mansfield on the LSWU website; '**strength in numbers!**'

A number of intermediaries have joined LSWU and we now have our own Intermediary group. (The cost depends on income; the maximum is £10/month.)

At present, we are working with other members to produce a shared objectives document, in order to consolidate our position and relationship with other legal sector workers who experience similar issues.

We have settled on 3 topics to begin:

- Cancellation payments – the present system for RIs is unfair and means that it is impossible to rely on income or plan financially.
- Late and non-payments through HMCTS as some are owed significant sums and are having little success getting paid. This also affects junior barristers and paralegals.
- Behaviour in the courtroom; hierarchy, respect for knowledge and opinions, flexibility and bullying have all been mentioned.



What are the benefits of joining?

The Union provides a structure; members' meetings to voice issues, hear how colleagues are affected and decide on action. The Union encourages communication with management. With the appointment of Union reps, concerns can be put to decision-makers and changes negotiated through collective bargaining, without any single individual having to put their job, reputation or working relationships at risk.

Trade union recognition also guarantees our right to be consulted on major workplace developments. Formal processes like this help to ease tensions more often than they aggravate them. However, when things do go wrong, support is on hand.

To find out more, visit: <https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/legalsectorworkers>

and listen to:

The Hearing – a legal podcast - Episode 42

We hope you will appreciate the benefits of joining with colleagues, strengthening our role and raising awareness.

If you have any questions, please call or email me.

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