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## £19 Million a Year Spent on Trade Union Activities During Teaching Hours

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Taxpayers are covering almost £19 million a year for teaching staff and other education employees to carry out trade union work during paid working hours, according to newly released figures.

An analysis of official Government data by the TaxPayers' Alliance found that “facility time”, where staff are permitted to spend part or all of their contracted hours on union duties,

remains a significant cost in the education sector. Under Government rules, all public sector organisations with more than 49 full-time employees must report their facility time figures annually.

Facility time can be used for a range of union-related activities, including negotiating pay and conditions, meeting with management, and preparing for potential industrial action. Strike days themselves are unpaid and recorded separately, but the time spent organising or representing members during normal working hours is funded by the taxpayer.

The report shows that in 2024, 631 education bodies across the UK collectively spent £18.9 million on facility time. This marks an increase of around 4 % on the £18.1 million recorded in 2023.

Some institutions recorded particularly high costs. The Open University topped the list, with nearly £600,000 spent on staff time allocated to union roles. Among Russell Group universities, the University of Manchester recorded the highest figure at approximately £439,000, followed by the University of Leeds at £350,000 and the University of Edinburgh at £297,000.

In some cases, the commitment to union duties was total. At 55 education organisations, at least one employee spent 100 % of their working hours carrying out trade union responsibilities rather than their regular teaching or administrative duties. Six universities had more than one staff member in such full-time union roles. At the University of Bristol, for example, five employees were recorded as spending their entire contracted hours on union work.

The TaxPayers' Alliance has argued that these figures highlight a growing cost burden on the public purse at a time when many educational institutions face financial challenges. While facility time is legally protected to ensure trade union representation and negotiation, critics suggest that its scale in some organisations may be excessive.

Supporters of the system argue that facility time helps maintain constructive industrial relations, provides staff with a voice in workplace decisions, and can prevent disputes from escalating. However, the figures have prompted debate over whether the balance between union representation and delivering core education services is being maintained.

With public finances under pressure and some universities warning of budget shortfalls, the data is likely to feed into wider discussions about how public funds are allocated in the education sector. The issue of facility time is expected to remain contentious, particularly in institutions already facing scrutiny over spending and performance.