

Unite and US union in historic tie-up

Print

By Andrew Taylor, Employment Correspondent

Published: May 26 2008 01:13 | Last updated: May 26 2008 01:13

A historic alliance between Unite, Britain's biggest trade union, and the almost 1m-strong United Steelworkers union in North America is about to create the first transatlantic union, with more than 2.5m working members.

The move is designed to provide greater protection for workers whose jobs are threatened by the spread of global capitalism. The UK and US partners hope unions from other countries will join the alliance, increasing its strength to combat the flow of jobs from developed nations to countries with lower costs where workers enjoy less protection.

US and European unions have become increasingly concerned at the readiness of multinational companies to move manufacturing and service operations to locations such as India, China and former communist countries in central and eastern Europe.

The transatlantic partnership is expected to fall short of a full merger. Both unions are expected to retain their existing organisational structures, which will be overseen by a new committee drawn from senior officials from both unions.

The decline in union membership in the UK – to under 7.5m from 13.2m in 1979 – has prompted a series of domestic union mergers. Unite was formed last year by a merger between Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G).

Amicus had previously signed co-operation deals with USW and the International Association of Machinists in the US, and the IG Metall union in Germany, while the T&G had forged working relationships in the US with the Teamsters and SEIU, the services sector union.

Previous examples of cross-border union co-operation include T&G's support for the Teamsters' campaign against **FirstGroup**, the UK-based bus and train operator accused of frustrating attempts by unions to organise workers at its expanding US business. FirstGroup denied the Teamsters' claims.

"One of the main reasons for the merger between Amicus and the T&G was our desire to create an international trade union that would be able to deal with multinational companies on an equal footing and organise working people in even greater numbers," said Derek Simpson, Unite's joint general secretary last year.

"Multinational companies are pushing down wages and conditions for workers the world over by playing one national workforce off against another. The only beneficiaries of globalisation are the exploiters of working people and the only way working people can resist this is to organise and band together."

United Steelworkers represents 850,000 workers in the steel, aluminium, glass and manufacturing sectors. Unite has about 1.8m members working at many of the country's biggest manufacturers. Including retired workers, the two unions have more than 3m members.

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2008