

Bargaining update

July 2026



BARGAINING BRIEFING

Introduction

This summer has seen record breaking heat and drought in the UK, including unprecedented wildfires in Scotland. The issue of extreme heat in the workplace, and worker protections from it, is more relevant than ever. This bargaining update covers existing laws around working in heat, and outlines areas of opportunity for bargaining on this issue. This update also covers new parts of the Employment Rights Act which will shortly come into force, and recent pay settlements.

Heat and maximum working temperatures

There is no legal maximum working temperature in the UK, but have a duty to protect the health and safety of their staff. Heat is a clear health and safety issue. As a recent report from the UK's Climate Change Committee (CCC) of independent climate advisors set out: "Working in high temperatures can lead to an inability to concentrate, fatigue, nausea, loss of consciousness, and death."

While Scotland has not yet seen the extreme levels of heat that have been felt in England and Wales, it should not be considered immune from dangerously high temperatures. As the severe wildfire in the Cairngorms showed, climate chaos is bringing unprecedented dangerous weather to Scotland at a rapid pace.

UNISON supports the TUC's recommendation of a maximum working temperature of 30°C, and 27°C for strenuous work. Introducing legal maximum working temperatures is a key recommendation for the UK government of the CCC's report.

UNISON members are particularly vulnerable to the dangers posed by high temperatures at work. UNISON members work in education and in social care, both settings in which workers are likely to experience the double whammy of the effects of high temperatures on themselves, and an increased and more complex workload due to the impact of heat on children and young people and on elderly and vulnerable people receiving social care services.

There are clear bargaining opportunities around heat, in UNISON's year of green activity, to keep workers safe. Recent examples of successes include:

- National Education Union colleagues negotiated with the corporate health and safety board at the London Borough of Harlow to produce a guidance on arrangements for managing extreme weather. These include reference to the 2023 Joint union heatwave protocol developed by education unions, including UNISON. The guidance takes a staggered approach, setting out mitigations and actions at various temperatures from 24c to 35c.
- Last summer, Unite sent all bus driver members letters to give to management when conditions became too hot in driver cabs. The letters informed the company the driver is stopping work for safety reasons, referring to their legal right to remove themselves from "serious and imminent danger" with protection from "detriment".

KEY POINTS:

- **Extreme heat is an increasingly relevant health and safety issue in the workplace**
- **Heat is a particularly relevant issue for UNISON members, some of whom support groups which are disproportionately impacted by heat, including elderly people, children, and people with health conditions**
- **The average pay settlement for July 2025 – July 2026 was 3.5% across the public, private, and third sectors**



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Agreements with employers on heat could include

- Introducing a minimum and maximum workplace temperature.
- A clear policy setting out what will happen when the maximum temperature is reached.
- Relaxing dress and uniform codes in the summer and/or improving the quality of the materials used.
- Extra breaks for night shift workers who may be suffering from lack of sleep during the day and subsequent fatigue during heatwaves.
- Making workplace adjustments for staff who may be more vulnerable to extreme heat.

Health and safety representatives should ensure that their employer has carried out an adequate risk assessment and taken measures of control to ensure that no worker suffers from heat or sunstroke, excess of sun exposure, dehydration, or heat stress; or from excessive exposure to the cold.

Employment Rights Act

- From 31 August new rules around electronic and workplace balloting for statutory trade union ballots will come into force.
- From 1 October, the time limit for bringing a claim to the Employment Tribunal will increase from 3 to 6 months – for breach of employment contract claims in Scotland this will change on 9 November.

Pay settlements

In the year from July 2025 to July 2026, average pay settlements across the UK for the last year are 3.5% across the economy and the same for the private, public, and third sectors. Energy and water had a slightly higher average at 3.85%.

Pay claims should emphasise that employers falling below relevant rates can expect damage to their ability to recruit and retain high-quality staff.

There were notable outliers in this period.

- Manchester Metrolink: 8.27%
- Warrington and Vale College: 6.5%
- Arriva Bus Leicester, Hinkley and Coalville: 6.5%
- First Bus Aberdeen: 5.3%
- Police Staff Council of England and Wales: 4.2%
- G4S (Police Service of Northern Ireland): 6%

All settlement figures should be taken in the context of the continually rising cost of living, examples of which are set out below.

Expenditure item	Mortgage interest payments	Bus and coach fares	Electricity	Gas
Price rise 2010-25	140%	108%	148%	98%

While the Bank of England held interest rates in July 2026, a sign of more steady inflation, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East could cause more instability and price shocks.

Action for branches

- Use the information in this briefing for pay and health and safety negotiations with your employer
- Ask your employer what their position is on a maximum working temperature
- Attend UNISON's upcoming Green Skills course for bargaining on climate issues
- Subscribe to Labour Research for the latest pay and bargaining news

Additional reading

- [UNISON bargaining support group: bargaining on annual pay rises](#)
- [The Climate Change Committee: A well adapted UK](#)
- [The Employment Rights Act: timeline](#)
- [Office for National Statistics: Consumer price inflation tables December 2025](#)
- [Labour Research: June 2026](#)



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