Scottish parliament election 2026 - activist briefing

UNISON

Influencers 2026

VIOLENCE AT WORK

Violence, aggression, and abuse at work have reached unacceptable levels across Scotland's public services. Tens of thousands of workers are assaulted each year simply for doing their jobs. This is not inevitable, and it is not part of the job. It is the predictable result of under resourced services, over stretched staff, and weak accountability. **Evidence consistently links rising violence at work to:**

- Staffing shortages and excessive workloads, particularly in the NHS and local government.
- Cuts to services and resources, leading to longer waits, reduced support and increased public frustration being redirected at staff.
- Poor reporting systems, inconsistent data collection, and a culture where abuse is minimised or normalised as "part of the job."
- Weak enforcement of employer duties under health and safety legislation.

Key Facts

- At least 75,411 assaults on public service workers were recorded in the most recent UNISON Scotland survey year – an average of around 206 every day. These figures represent only reported incidents and are widely accepted to be an undercount.
- Local government staff account for just over 6 in 10 of all reported assaults, with violence particularly concentrated in schools, nurseries, social care, and social work.
- NHS Scotland staff continue to face rising levels of violence and aggression, with many boards reporting increases, driven by workforce shortages, long waits, and system pressures.
- Women workers are disproportionately affected, reflecting the gendered nature of public service roles. Many employers still fail to record incidents by sex, undermining prevention.
- Black workers and other minoritised groups face additional risks of racial abuse and harassment, which are inconsistently reported and poorly addressed.

Key Actions UNISON is calling for:

- A national zero tolerance framework - Clear, enforceable national standards on preventing and responding to violence at work across all public services. Mandatory employer reporting of all incidents, including verbal abuse, with union involvement.
- Proper staffing and investment - Recognise that violence is a workforce issue. Fund safe staffing levels in health, education, care, and local government to reduce risk at source.
- Stronger enforcement and accountability - Greater scrutiny of employer compliance with health and safety duties. Improved enforcement action where organisations systematically fail to protect staff.
- Support for workers affected by violence - Guaranteed access to paid time off, trauma informed support and follow up risk assessments.
- Transparency and better data - Extend Freedom of Information coverage to outsourced and arms length bodies delivering public services. Mandatory equality monitoring of incidents by sex, race, and job role.

Public services: the heart of a fairer Scotland

UNISON Scotland

Promoted by: UNISON Scotland, 14 West Campbell Street, Glasgow, G2 6RX