

UNISON

In the second instalment in Electronics Watch's "Meet our Affiliates" series, we showcase another of our 1,500 affiliates and shine a light on the key people implementing responsible procurement.

Affiliates since:
September 2017

Interviewee: Gemma Freedman,
International Officer, International Unit,
and Electronics Watch Vice President



Why did UNISON affiliate to Electronics Watch?

UNISON was part of the campaign for the Modern Slavery Act 2015 in the UK and was preparing to write our first Modern Slavery Statement. Our partner at the time, People and Planet, which was part of the NGO coalition that founded Electronics Watch, introduced us to Electronics Watch and we affiliated as its aims were consistent with UNISON's mission.

Unlike most Electronics Watch affiliates, your organisation is not a public purchasing authority.

No. UNISON is one of the biggest trade unions in the UK. Our 1.3 million members work in public services including the NHS, local authorities, higher education and schools, and in police and justice; as well as for private contractors providing public services and for utility companies.

What is your role at UNISON?

I am an International Officer in the International Unit, which works with individual unions and global union federations to defend public services and human and trade union rights. We also run an international development cooperation fund which allows us to fund projects with unions in the global south and our civil society partners, like Electronics Watch.

How does Electronics Watch and its network benefit from UNISON's affiliation?

We raise awareness with our members so they can promote Electronics Watch to their employers, as well as promote more ethical procurement practices in global supply chains. UNISON's affiliation also helps to advance Electronics Watch's leadership as a labour rights organisation. UNISON brings the trade union perspective to operational discussions and supports Electronics Watch to engage trade unions.

Our engagement has also shaped specific Electronics Watch outputs like the [Principles of Worker-Driven Remedy](#), where we contributed to ensuring that trade unionists in the global south were consulted and how trade union rights abuses were articulated. The Principles now reflect the reality of trade unions as human rights defenders in strong and clear terms.

What impact has UNISON's affiliation had?

Since 2018, as the Modern Slavery Act's shortcomings became clear, UNISON has been campaigning for a UK human rights and environmental due diligence law - see www.goodbusinessmatters.org if you want to learn more. Our proposal uniquely includes the public sector within its scope. Electronics Watch has helped to make that ambition feel concrete and achievable.

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What makes Electronics Watch different from other sustainable procurement solutions available?

No whitewashing. Electronics Watch is unique in making sure that good policies on paper do not end up being empty promises. Electronics Watch is proving that it is possible to be both highly objective and to support the ILO's fundamental human and labour rights to Freedom of Association and to collectively bargain, without compromising either.

These rights, which include the right to form and join trade unions, to organise workers and to negotiate with employers without employer interference, are the rights that, once achieved, enable all other labour and human rights in the workplace to then be tackled. Many of your affiliates reading this will have direct experience with that in their own workplaces.

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What's the biggest challenge that affiliates face in supporting workers in global supply chains?

The power dynamics. The companies are extremely powerful, and many of the governments in the countries of production have a history of ignoring or even enabling union busting activities through weak regulation and/or enforcement. Electronics Watch makes progress possible, but the power imbalance is monumental.

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What achievement are you most proud of in relation to your affiliation?

Having been part of and supported the amazing journey that Electronics Watch has taken with its affiliates and monitoring partners.

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