

Industrial disputes becoming more polarised

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Two new reports from workplace expert Acas published today show that groups involved in industrial disputes are increasingly polarised.

The reports look at people's perceptions of group workplace conflict in Britain and Acas's role in helping to resolve them.

Acas is the leading authority on workplace relations and dispute resolution in Great Britain.

Acas provides a free, impartial and voluntary collective conciliation service, which means when there is a disagreement between an employer and a group of employees, Acas can help both sides try to come to an agreement and settle the dispute.

The evaluation shows that Acas's collective conciliation remains highly rated amongst those who use it; but those involved in workplace conflict are becoming more polarised and are increasingly unsure how to resolve the issue.

Decreasing negotiation skills, lack of experience of handling collective conflict, increasingly polarised starting positions and challenging economic and political factors have all contributed to an increase in parties seeking Acas's help.

Acas Director of Dispute Resolution Kate Nowicki said:

"Industrial disputes increased last year against a challenging economic and political backdrop, and we have seen the landscape of collective workplace conflict become more complex, with opposing positions often more entrenched.

"Despite this, our research shows that satisfaction levels amongst Acas customers remain very high. We are listening carefully to what people say about us, gaining new insights to make sure that our conciliation service is as good as it can be.

"This validation of the service comes at an important time, as the employment relations landscape faces significant change with the introduction of the government's Employment Rights Bill."

Acas Chief Conciliator Marina Glasgow added:

"The report underlines the importance of Acas as an impartial, independent expert in workplace disputes and it reflects our success.

"I'm delighted that the research shows that the vast majority of our customers get good outcomes for their organisations. Turning to Acas is a hallmark of success, not failure, and this research validates that choice.

"It is extremely satisfying to be able to help people in heated, entrenched situations come out the other side able to shake hands and move forward."

Acas was involved in 618 collective disputes between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024.

Read more:

- [Acas collective conciliation evaluation 2023](#)

- [Continuity and change in collective workplace conflict in Britain](#)

Media enquiries

[Contact the Acas press office](#)

Background notes

1. Acas collective conciliation evaluation 2023 was carried out in partnership with the National Centre for Social Research. It provides the first full evaluation of Acas's collective conciliation service since 2016. It assesses how the service is being delivered, whether it is achieving its intended impacts, and what improvements could be made.

The new evaluation is based around a Theory of Change, which sets out how the collective conciliation service is expected to bring about its intended outcomes and impacts. The service was assessed against the outcomes and impacts identified in the Theory of Change by conducting both a survey of 241 collective conciliation customers who had used the service in 2022-23, and in-depth qualitative interviews with 26 of these customers.

The report showed that:

- Acas conciliators remain highly regarded by customers, with 93% agreeing that their conciliator was trustworthy and 91% agreeing they were impartial
- nearly three-quarters (73%) rated the service 6 or 7 out of 7 (where 1 is the lowest, and 7 the highest level of satisfaction)
- almost 9 in 10 (87%) of customers, whose dispute was resolved, felt that Acas played an important role in bringing about a positive resolution (4 or 5 out of 5, where 5 is 'very important')

2. 'Continuity and change in collective workplace conflict in Britain: A classification of contemporary actors, issues and channels' was produced by Warwick Business School's Industrial Relations Research Unit and examined perceptions of continuity and change in collective workplace conflict in Britain.

The researchers carried out a literature review and interviews with largely Acas conciliators, plus union officials, employers' organisations and industrial relations and labour law scholars to explore 3 dimensions:

- Who are the actors involved in collective workplace conflict?
- What are the issues causing collective conflict?
- What are the channels through which it manifests?

Across all 3 categories they looked for evidence of both continuity and change.

The report showed:

- there is a general decrease in knowledge and experience amongst employers, employees and their representatives about how they can manage conflict in the workplace, how they can move towards agreement, and when they should seek external support from Acas
- increasing distance between employers and unions in the initial tabling of positions
- loss of confidence that collective conflict can be effectively resolved effectively as parties' positions are more entrenched
- less of an understanding of the compromise needed to secure agreements, with a view that a dispute must be 'won' rather than simply 'settled'
- challenging economic and political conditions