Work-related strains are the European Union’s No. 1 occupational health problem. Now the first ever Europe-wide trade union campaign is to get to grips with the strain injury epidemic.

What's the problem?
Why, with today’s occupational health, ergonomic- and design knowledge, with the regulation and enforcement of minimum working conditions, are musculoskeletal disorders blighting more and more workplaces? Europe under strain, a new, detailed TUC-backed European campaign guide, spells out why.

Old hazards: Lifting, carrying and tiring repetitive work in most traditional low-tech jobs still affects a large proportion of the working population. One in three workers in Europe still have to pull, drag, handle or lift heavy weights as part of their job.

New hazards: New management and production methods are increasing the physical and mental pressures on workers, creating a new generation of high risk jobs.

Increasing hazards: Risk factors for strain injuries include highly paced work, long hours, tight deadlines, mechanisation, new technology and a lack of worker control over the design and execution of the job are increasing in the European Union.

Unions cure strains
Action by the TUC and UK unions - by winning victories, campaigns for better workplaces and work systems, including the TUC’s highly regarded Don’t suffer in silence campaign - has been the most powerful force challenging Britain’s strain epidemics.

The story is repeated elsewhere in the world in upward strain cases was curtailed in Australia and the USA after high profile union campaigns. Europe’s unions have made similar inroads.

Global action: Swedish union federation TCO introduces a stringent ergonomic and environmental standard for visual display unit operation and design. It opens offices in Sweden and the USA to promote the use of computer hardware and software. Soon the major US manufacturer will soon widely adopt this TCO99 standard.

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National action: Italian union FIOM fights decades for decades for improved working environments.

Industrial action: A Danish textile union uncovers widespread neck and shoulder injuries in sewing machines. It campaigns for and wins recognition of the condition as a new industrial disease. Hundreds of suffering women are awarded compensation.

Causess and solutions
Occupational health researchers have identified five groups of risk factors for workplace strains and sprains, and measures to combat them. Some are more worker friendly than others, so union reps should always consider the implications of strain reduction initiatives.

Risk factor 1 Repetitiveness
Solutions
- Use mechanical aids
- Encourage work diversity by adding more demanding diversions
- Automate certain in tasks
- Rotate workers
- Increase rest allowances
- Spread work uniformly across work shift
- Restructure jobs

Risk factor 2 Posture/Workplace
Solutions
- Decrease weight of tools/containers and parts
- Increase friction between handles and hands
- Optimise size and shape of handles
- Improve work layout
- Select gloves to minimise effects of pressure
- Balance hand-held tools and containers
- Use ergonomic control devices
- Enlarge corners and edges
- Use pads and cushions

Risk factor 3 Posture
Solutions
- Locate work to reduce awkward postures
- Alter position to tools to avoid bending of wrist
- Move worker to reduce awkward postures
- Select tool design for workstation

Risk factor 4 Vibration
Solutions
- Select tools with minimum vibration
- minimise exposure to static and edge finishing
- Use mechanical assistance
- Use isolation for tools that operate at resonance point
- Provide damping for tools that operate at resonance point
- Adjust tool speed to avoid resonance

Risk factor 5 Psychosocial stress
Solutions
- Enlarge workers’ task duties
- Allow more worker control over process of work
- Provide micro work pauses
- Minimise paced work
- Eliminate blind electronic monitoring

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a US Department of Health and Human Services.

unts supported expanded use of ’body maps’ to encourage employers to take the problem seriously. Body mapping - first promoted in the "body maps" to encourages employers to take the problem seriously. Body mapping - first promoted in the UK by TUC-backed book is fully illustrated and shows how to tackle workplace strain.

Hazardous FACTSHEET 68

Europe under strain

Dangerous Europe under strain

Situation: The UK TUC has developed a major union policy, summarised below.

Aims: The aim of this agreement is to provide a healthy and safe working environment and to prevent the development of RSI. The employer and the union recognise that there must be a programme of preventative action.

This will include an employer commitment to consult the union to conduct risk assessments for potentially hazardous tasks and when there are significant changes to the work systems, work methods, equipment, enviroment or training. To implement any necessary changes; and to properly resource education and training measures. Employers should also use a union agreed medical pracitioner experienced in RSI to monitor and advise on regular basis. They will undertakae to examine or harass employees who develop RSI or report symptoms.

Risk assessment: Risk assessments covering work equipment, workplaces and methods will be necessary action on the basis of medical advice, including the nature, caus- es, extent and response to a strain injury case.

These steps will be taken: A review of the risk assessment of the job by an independent competent person agreed by both management and union.

- Provision of the assessment and reports to the employee concerned.

- Implementation, as appropriate, of changes necessary to enable the employees to return to their position, or of suitable retraining and redeployment.

- Access to the workplace by the health professionals treating the employee.

- Training of the employee in ergonomic and preventive principles (also see Making the job fit, ergonomics factsheet, Hazards 56).

- Where the employee is redeployed.

- Job security will be a primary objective and sick leave will be paid (also see Sickness absence policies, Hazards factsheet, Hazards 66).

- There will be full consultation with the employee on career options and procedures to pay any tax to be paid being taken.

- Detailed job descriptions of prospective positions will be provided to them suitable for work with no pressure to return until fully fit (also see Disabil- ity Discrimination Act factsheet, Hazards 59).

- Modifications to prospective positions to make them suitable for work will be undertaken where necessary.

- Resumed return to work will be allowed with no pressure to return until fully fit (also see Disabil- ity Discrimination Act factsheet, Hazards 59).

- Regular monitoring and annual review of this position will be carried out by the health and safety committee and any difficulties reported to the person responsible for the design of the policy.

BODY MAPPED: The TUC says Britain is facing a back pain epidemic, and is urging union reps to use ‘body maps’ to encourage employers to take the problem seriously. Body mapping - first promoted in the UK by Hazards (fact sheets 61) - lets workers map out where they hurt and work out what work factors might be responsible. The maps are particularly aware of the increased risk to women workers (also see Women hurt at work, Hazards 67).

TUC report Putting pain on the map. Five with severe pain from Women backs trade union, TUC 23-28 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. A body mapping poster and a leaflet, both titled ‘Don’t suffer in silence’, are available free from the same address.