

THE UNION EFFECT

Health and safety is negotiable – it's just when it comes to our lives and our health, unions won't take no for an answer. Sometimes just identifying problems and asking for improvements is enough. Other times it takes more – from hard negotiations to hard-nosed trade union action.

This "union safety effect" is very real and very pronounced. A classic study found UK workplaces with an active union safety system had an injury rate half that of workplaces without these systems. Only the study was wrong – a recent academic re-examination of the evidence "led to results which are actually, if anything, a stronger confirmation of the mediated effects of trade unions on injuries at work" (*Hazards* 99).

It's a healthy effect too. Another UK study found: "The proportion of employees who are trade union members has a positive and significant association on both injury and illness rates." It added unions "lower the odds of injury and illness when compared with arrangements that merely inform employees of OHS [occupational health and safety] issues."

And a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) commissioned evaluation of an accident prevention project in the printing industry concluded that a key factor in its success was the union role, and recommended "the encouragement of workforce involvement in health and safety, including involvement in the development of action plans."

Making work healthier and safer the union way is even good for the economy. A UK government investigation found the savings to society stemming from the activities of union safety reps – fewer sick and injured workers – runs to hundreds of millions of pounds every year (*Hazards* 97).

Resources
The union effect
www.hazards.org/unioneffect
Union safety reps
www.hazards.org/safetyreps
Union organisation
www.hazards.org/organise

GIVE YOUR WORKPLACE A UNION HEALTH CHECK

◆ **Union organisation** Make sure you have effective union coverage across the workplace – including shiftworkers, off-site workers and workers with childcare and other responsibilities that might mean they can't participate so easily in union activities – and that union reps have the time, support and facilities they need to maximise their effectiveness (*Hazards* 94). Check that no-one misses out on union protection.

◆ **Union active** Make yourself seen and heard. Do a workplace walk through and talk to workers about their concerns – the problems, what's been done, what's not been done. Make sure formal inspections and investigations are happening with sufficient frequency and thoroughness. Could problems have been missed? Consider a mapping exercise, survey or a "brains trust" meeting with other union reps. Encourage members to raise problems.

◆ **Union audit** Are systems working effectively? Or do you raise issues again and again without anything being done? If yes, you need to do something different. Raise the problem with union colleagues and devise an action plan. When dealing with management, keep a paper trail, set timetables for action and check to see deadlines are observed.

◆ **Union training** Trained reps are effective reps. "The findings provide powerful evidence of the extent to which trade union training supports workplace activities and achievements of health and safety representatives," concluded a study for HSE (*Hazards* 86). It added "it is likely that training does not simply support the continued existence of such achievement, but acts as a stimulus for their initiation and development."

UNION workplaces are SAFER workplaces.

GET ORGANISED or you may not live to regret it.

