You slip, trip, fall. You are exposed to toxic chemicals. You lift, you carry, you get strains. You are stressed to the eyeballs. All of this and the law says you should be safe and healthy at work. Mick Holder looks at how safety reps can organise to close the reality gap on workplace safety.

The union effect

Responsible employers will work with unions to promptly remedy safety concerns. The workplaces with full union recognition and joint health and safety committees are the safest of all, more than twice as safe as those with no union or committee (Hazards 58). Similar findings have been reported in the US and elsewhere (Hazards 66).

Building a safer workplace is in the hands of all employees and not just the union. Safety committees are also key. Where unions negotiate on safety, they are more successful than where unions don’t (Hazards 67). And new research says traditional industrial action works.

A London School of Economics discussion paper last year said “strikes and slow downs serve as efficacious union tools for reducing workplace injuries,” concluding: “Even if unions and management engage in poor relations with each other, if the worker has a collective voice, the better the workplace.”

The law: Lots of laws deal with health and safety at work, and they are all there to provide a framework that requires employers to protect their workers.

Sitting down, standing up, walking out

Case histories of creative union action include:

- **SIT DOWN PROTEST**: Bad seating in a police control room was causing backache for civilian employees - but the cop in charge didn’t see why he should spend money on seating. UNION members in the Kent police branch started to put their bad back symptoms in the accident book each shift as soon as they felt them, then took time off work sick. In less than two weeks the necessary improvements were made.

- **GAS OFF**: Railway train crew had been refused telephones that they needed to talk to the employer, telling all workers their safety reps is and who is responsible on the manage-ment side. More creative forms of communication can pay dividends too... many unions communicate with safety reps via the internet. And some local unions run internal web-sites, telling members which reps is responsible for what in which area (Hazards 72).

Safety reps should know:

- Local union structure at work, including any convenors, deputys, reps with special responsibili- tities, including first aiders, fire officers, rescue teams;
- Local union branch, including where it meets and when, and local trades council, including where it meets and when and who is del-egated from your union to sit on it.
- Notices of safety meetings, and who is invited.

Safety reps must treat all their members fairly and be sensitive to issues that may arise which affect any one group of workers - for example, women, reli- gious or racial groups, workers with a disability, young workers or those who work outside normal hours such as cleaners and security staff. Repre-senting everyone fairly makes for a stronger union.

Health and safety is one of the main reasons people join unions, so the higher the profile, the better.

Safety reps must make sure they know exactly who they represent as they may not represent all workers, members of other unions or non-union workers. They should know how and when to raise issues with both the management and union, when to expect action and any appeals or grievance procedures.

Use your rights

Safety committees: Safety commit-tees with full union involvement make the workplace much safer. However, safety committees are also notorious for being world class talk-ing shops. Give yours a health check to make sure it is doing its job.

Safety policy: All employers are re- quire to have a safety policy stating their commitment to safety and setting out detail of the organisation and arrangements in the business to secure a safe and healthy workplace. Get hold of it, improve it.

Risk assessments: The method that employers must use to ensure a safe and healthy workplace is called “risk assessment” - and it isn’t rocket sci-ence. Employers must look at jobs done, identify any potential prob-lems and who might be affected, review what they do to prevent in-jury and act to ensure that nothing goes wrong (Hazards 44). Safety reps must be consulted by employers when they are doing risk assessments.

Accident reporting: Employers are required to have a system for em-ployees to record any accidents, normally called the accident book. Accident and incident statistics give safety reps a good indication of what is going on in the workplace - as long as everyone is reporting them. The law: Lots of laws deal with health and safety at work, and they think it should be improved. The law should be consid-ered a tool to help negotiate improvements, and not relied on exclusively to solve the problem. It is rarely enough on its own. Consultation: Employers must con-sult with safety reps on all issues that may affect the health, safety and wellbeing of employees - and they must do it in good time. So telling a rep a new computer system has just arrived is not “consultation in good time”. Reps and employees should be involved in any changes at the workplace from the planning stage onwards, through purchase and implementation.

Essential information

Hazard: The insurance for this article (see page 31).

Hazards 74

**SO YOU KNOW THE JOB IS DANGEROUS. WHAT NOW?**

HAZARDS FACTSHEET 74

DOWN TOOLS: Construction workers at this site in Edmonton, north London, stopped work for a few hours after a fatal accident on the site. The result of involving the workers in this mass action led a few days later to a wide range of trade union demands being put forward.

BRANCH OUT: Nursing assistants and domestic staff taking a union meeting at a west London hospital.

**UNION workplaces are safer workplaces. This isn’t a matter of chance or because unions are only to be found in safer firms. It is because unions provide the voice, skills and the workplace muscle needed to secure improve-ments.**

Where unions negotiate on safety issues workplaces are safer than those without union involvement. Where employers won’t negotiate in good faith, unions can use their collective strength to demand improvements.

Unions have used techniques from strikes, to boycotts of danger-ous substances and processes (Hazards 58). Union reps frequently deal with employer’s legal breaches. The handouts were distributed at the meeting and what issues are being raised with the boss in the workplace as a whole. They also need to find out about the management of the organisation and how this links with the union and safety reps.

Communicate: It is good practice to have a poster or a leaflet given out at work by the employer, telling all workers who their safety rep is and who is responsible on the manage-ment side. More creative forms of communication can pay dividends too... many unions communicate with safety reps via the internet. And some local unions run internal web-sites, telling members which reps is responsible for what in which area (Hazards 72).

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