Get a life!

Don't be worked into the ground

thing from soft toilet rolls to hard hats. And not only is this bad for the workers and the economy too. TUC general secretary John Monks said: “Britain’s low hours culture is a national disgrace. It leads to stress, ill-health and family strains. But even worse it’s an indictment on how badly we manage work in the UK.” Other countries produce more, earn more and work far shorter hours. We should, and can, do the same, if employers, unions and government work together.”

The report adds: “Members of the office staff may show signs of fatigue and can, do the same, if employers, unions and government work together.”

Work breakdown

A lifetime later, the lesson still hasn’t been learned. TUC figures released in February 2002 show union compensation claims for work-related stress have increased 12-fold, up to 6,428 cases in the year (Hazards 77). A paper published last year in the British Journal of Industrial Relations noted that work load had intensified over the last two decades. Another 2001 report concluded that UK workers at least – and especially women – those that got promoted were the ones who worked the over-time [DIT work life balance – key facts].

Escalating pace and volume of work is adversely affecting our physical and mental health, leading to stress, strain, burnout and ill-health (Hazards 69, 75). It can drive us to drink and drugs and even away from our families (Hazards 77). A September 2001 study for the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) concluded suicide attempts, family breakdown and physical illness are some of the effects of extreme working hours. Work, for many here and abroad, just isn’t working.

Changing times: The TUC’s guide to worklife balance includes an eight point process:

1. Developing joint working
2. Teambuilding and project planning
3. Involving staff
4. Involving customers
5. Trying out ideas
6. Widering horizons
7. Developing skills
8. Practical results and evaluation

More: www.hazards.org/getalife

Benchmarking: CWA working conditions study

Members of CWA’s union CWA took strike action over “lean and mean” production methods. The union pulled together good contract language, news and background briefings. The union urges workplace union reps to:

Challenge the power of management to pressure, encourage or allow employees to be overloaded at work.

Remind employers of their obligation under the health and safety legislation to take all reasonable precautions for a safe workplace.

Pressure government safety inspectors to take seriously at the effects of chronic work overload, and to devise strategies to address the problem.

Collectively to ensure safe workloads and working arrangements.

Begin local community debates about the health and safety (and social) consequences of excessive working hours and workload.

More: www.hazards.org/getalife

Strategies

There’s no single right way to improve working conditions – be creative.

Campaigns: Unions worldwide are developing work-life balance campaigns, many stressing the health and safety implications of too much, too intense, too inflexible work. UK unions have pushed for a new stress law (Hazards 71). The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, which launched its own “get a life” campaign this year, encouraged its members to take time out to do “absolutely nothing.” NZCTU president Ross Wilson said: “The concept of doing absolutely nothing for 15 minutes would leave workers refreshed and relaxed and could only have a good impact on their work.”

Australian unions have taken a long hours test case to the courts.

Compensation: Despite the legal difficulties (page 19), compensation claims for stress-related ill health can cost employers hundreds of thousands, of pounds and focus the attention of managers (Hazards 75). Unions have won claims for workers who have suffered breakdowns and hundreds of discarded contracts by overstretched workers who have taken their own lives (Hazards 69). In Korea, chronic fatigue syndrome caused by work-related fatigue and stress is a recognised occupational disease (Hazards 75). In Canada, sleep disruption and exhaustion caused by shift work has been compensated (page 11).

Safe staffing: Californian nursing unions have won “safe staffing laws” (Hazards 73). Washington state may soon follow. It is possible in the US, it is possible almost anywhere.

Industrial action: Action over under-staffing and overload is not uncommon. Use health and safety evidence to strengthen your arguments.

End note: What you need to do is a hazard at work. Overwork can cause stress and strains, and can mean you can’t possibly do the job right. The Health and Safety Executive ordered two nuclear industry companies to stop planned staff reductions and to tackle excessive working hours because of safety concerns (Hazards 69).

Load or overload?

Canadian public sector union CUPE’s workload campaign includes an online, step-by-step guide to tackling excessive workload, including a workplace survey tool. The union pulls together good contract language, news and background briefings. The union urges workplace union reps to:

Challenge the power of management to pressure, encourage or allow employees to be overloaded at work.

Remind employers of their obligation under the health and safety legislation to take all reasonable precautions for a safe workplace.

Pressure government safety inspectors to take seriously at the effects of chronic work overload, and to devise strategies to address the problem.

Collectively to ensure safe workloads and working arrangements.

Begin local community debates about the health and safety (and social) consequences of excessive working hours and workload.

More: www.hazards.org/getalife

Union solutions

Unions worldwide are developing strategies so work doesn’t take over our lives.

Programme:

Gastrointestinal disorders
Depression
Nervousness
Pressure to work overtime (paid and unpaid)
Long and difficult hours
It says work overload includes:

Unrealistic expectations
Physical strains of the job
Dependence on computers
Lack of communication
Inadequate organization
Increased exposure to health and safety hazards such as noise, temperature extremes and hazardous chemicals

www.hazards.org/getalife

HAZARDS FACTSHEET 78

ON THIS UP AT WORK

IN THIS UP AT WORK

www.hazards.org/getalife

HAZARDS FACTSHEET 78

ON THIS UP AT WORK

IN THIS UP AT WORK