

The safety squad

The Construction Confederation thought it was on safe ground when it set out to block the TUC's Worker Safety Adviser (WSAs) scheme. As the first WSAs take up their "revolutionary" roving role, TUC safety specialist Owen Tudor explains how badly the industry body got it wrong.

"This is an ideal opportunity for us to prove that good health and safety is good business. We hope to change the culture."

Billy Baldwin is one of nine Worker Safety Advisers (WSAs) who started working with small companies and their workers across Great Britain in March 2002.

Selected by building workers' union UCATT, paid for by the official safety body HSE and trained by TUC tutors, Billy will be visiting building sites in the North

West to test out whether the WSA concept can improve health and safety performance through fostering worker consultation and participation.

Supporting the WSA pilot in construction is one of the commitments that trade unions in the industry made at the Construction Safety Summit in February 2001 (*Hazards 73*), so construction is an important part of the pilot.

In addition to Billy, there are two other WSAs in construction, covering sites

in Glasgow and London.

Three WSAs are operating in the voluntary sector (in Liverpool, London and Tyneside); one WSA is dealing with small automotive fabrication in the Midlands, and there are two lucky WSAs covering the pubs and clubs of Cardiff and Kensington.

These pioneers are well qualified to assist employers and workers to work together. Several have the status of a Technician Safety Practitioner (Tech-SP) which the TUC and safety officers' professional body IOSH agreed last year should validate safety rep training and the TUC Certificate course (*Hazards 75*).

But it's not just safety qualifications they bring to the pilot.

Billy Baldwin spent the first eight years of the Thatcher government in the armed forces as a tank crewman because there wasn't much else in the way of work for a school-leaver in the North West. In the late eighties, he went to work for Wigan council and became a shop steward and safety rep. After eight years of that, he took the well-worn path to the trade union-backed Ruskin College and then a BA from Lancaster University.

All the WSAs are conscious of the revolutionary implications of their role. Never before have people selected by unions and funded by government been allowed

such unparalleled access to workplaces without union organisation already in place. They certainly aren't going there to recruit, but they know that they are ambassadors for the trade union movement.

The WSA pilots arose out of trade union calls for "roving safety reps" (*Hazards 72*).

Employer concerns about those calls have resulted in a different name, but once the underlying idea of a roving safety rep was explained, there was much less of a problem – except in the construction industry where the Construction Confederation blew hot and cold about whether to take part before finally deciding they had always been opposed to the scheme.

But by that time they had effectively isolated themselves from their own industry. The trade press was poking fun at their reluctance to allow outsiders onto sites. "They might find something," was the explanation offered by trade journal *Construction News*.

The Federation of Master Builders stepped in with offers of workplaces willing to test the pilots in three parts of the country, and major employers, too, were willing to be involved – offers only turned down because of the need to get the pilots up and running quickly.

Many people now feel



NO ARGUMENT WSA Chris Tiff says his new job will give him access to workers on smaller sites. He doesn't see WSAs as a threat, "but part of a partnership approach."

WSA GOING ON

The WSA pilots will run for the rest of 2002 and will then be evaluated by York Consulting Ltd, researchers appointed by HSE to oversee and assess the success of the scheme. Ministers and the HSC are as anxious to see those results as the TUC, "because there is clearly a head of steam now building up," says the union body, adding it was "flooded with high quality applications from fantastically experienced safety reps from all sectors of the economy."

TUC general secretary John Monks said: "I am pleased that so many quality volunteers came forward – it was a testament both to the skills and commitment that is out there, and also to the willingness people in the movement have to try new ways to protect their fellow workers. I'm only sorry we couldn't appoint more."

OZ UNION DEMANDS RIGHT OF ENTRY

An Australian union is demanding immediate right of entry provisions in the wake of a 10-year-old girl being mutilated in a Sydney sweatshop. The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union says the restoration of immediate entry rights is the only protection against a repetition of the incident in which Yu Ge, employed by River Island Clothing, had half her right hand and thumb amputated after being caught in a machine.

Unions in New South Wales (NSW) have a legal right of immediate access to workplaces on health and safety grounds but, in practice, this relies on rare tip-offs. They cannot enter sweatshops on the off-chance safety regulations are being abused. A recent NSW State Government Sweat Shop Taskforce uncovered a string of industry abuses. Health and safety violations topped a list that also featured evading workers' compensation payments.

that the Construction Confederation made a fool of itself by pandering to the worst prejudices of its backwoods members – and the positive response of the rest of the industry is a good omen for the future of health and safety in the sector.

"The WSA pilot is one of the best things that has happened in health and safety for the construction industry," says Chris Tiff – the other UCATT-selected WSA, who will be covering London sites. "In my discussions with employers, I will ensure that the WSA is not seen as a threat from the trade unions, but part of a partnership approach where we can work together to ensure safety on sites."

Chris came to work as a plant operator in the South

East 18 years ago from Belfast. He first became active in trade unions as a safety rep on what is now the Landmark Hotel in Marylebone. Then he became a shop steward and safety rep at the Bluewater project in Dartford, helping create the biggest shopping centre in Britain.

He secured TechSP status and last year joined UCATT fulltime to work on Canary Wharf and with major companies like Bovis Lendlease, Mace Construction and Skanska.

He says: "I intend to use my position and the influence it gives me to gain access onto smaller sites that I would not normally be allowed to visit." Billy Baldwin adds: "I am acutely aware of the difficulties of

getting to grips with the sheer amount of legislation, especially for small and medium-sized businesses."

It isn't just the legislation that WSAs will be boning up on. Chris Tiff says workers themselves present problems that need addressing.

"I feel it is essential to pay particular attention to workers from different ethnic groups to find ways to explain to them about basic health and safety information and procedures. I will be aiming to get information translated so that I can give presentations in the site canteens that are understood by all groups of workers."

The final WSA in construction is George Kane of the T&G who will be covering Glasgow.

I'm bad, notice me

Union Inspection Notices (UINs), launched exclusively in *Hazards* in November 2001 (*Hazards* 76), are already making people take notice.

Official backing: The Health and Safety Commission's new enforcement policy statement (*Hazards* 77) recognises the role that warnings from safety reps should play in deciding whether to prosecute – giving official backing to the UIN process. Paragraph 40 of the statement says: "HSC also expects that, in the public interest, enforcing authorities will consider prosecution ... where following an investigation or other regulatory contact ... a breach which gives rise to significant risk has continued despite relevant warnings from employees or their representatives."

PCS reps serve UINs: After a week of increasingly violent incidents culminating in a threat to take a member of staff hostage, PCS members employed as immigration officers have removed the threat to their safety by refusing to have face-to-face contact with detainees. PCS served a Union Inspection Notice on Kevin Brewer, director of the Dungavel detention centre, "demanding that the appropriate risk assessments be done and a safe system of work be put in place."

Train company: Union reps in the rail union TSSA on Merseyside can now use UINs as part of agreed workplace inspection procedures. Arriva Trains Merseyside accepted the TSSA's argument that the use of UINs by safety reps will complement existing procedures. TSSA negotiations officer Steve Coe commented: "All employers should be seeking to incorporate the UIN scheme into their existing health and safety procedures and supporting reps who want to enhance their existing skills and knowledge through extra training in UIN application."

Get trained! The TUC is now providing UIN training courses for safety reps. Some of the pilots are part of Stage I and II courses, others are stand-alone courses. For more information see the TUC safety webpages: www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/
Check out the news and resources on UINs at www.hazards.org/notices