



# you GOTTA FIGHT for your rights

You think we have got safety cracked? Well, injuries may have fallen but work cancers, insecurity and mental health conditions are rocketing. Informed collective action will really make work better.

The 40th anniversary of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations (SRSC) is a time to look back at what has been achieved. We should take pride that fatalities and accident rates have reduced significantly over the past four decades. Back in the 1970s, one building worker was killed in an industrial accident every working day. Thankfully that figure has now been cut by around 75 per cent.

But just as anti-discrimination laws did not eradicate racism or sexism, workplace health and safety did not automatically improve because of a change in legislation. Amending the statute book is one thing, making progress in the real world is quite another. We had to fight for everything that has been achieved. It took hard work by an army of volunteer safety reps who have worked tirelessly to improve the working conditions on behalf of their fellow workers.

The sight of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and employers patting

themselves on the back for the improvement in workplace safety is therefore more than a bit galling. Some employers recognise the value of a reality check and have been willing to collaborate with unions: We thank them for it and hope that others will follow their lead.

## Bloody ignorance

But after 40 years, far too many employers still haven't seen the light and the result for working people can be devastating. As well as the memorable disasters that have stuck in the public consciousness such as Kings Cross and Piper Alpha, there have been countless smaller tragedies that shattered families. When things go wrong, time and again, coroners' courts or official reports flagged up where employers deliberately cut corners to save money or completely ignored repeated complaints by the workforce.

Safety reps were not just ignored; we were ridiculed by politicians and the

mainstream media and in some cases vindictively targeted by big business. The blacklisting of safety reps in construction is so well documented that it has become part of union mythology, but victimisation was not restricted to the building industry. Teachers, carers, train drivers, dinner ladies, engineers and factory workers have all been unfairly dismissed after complaining on behalf of their fellow workers.

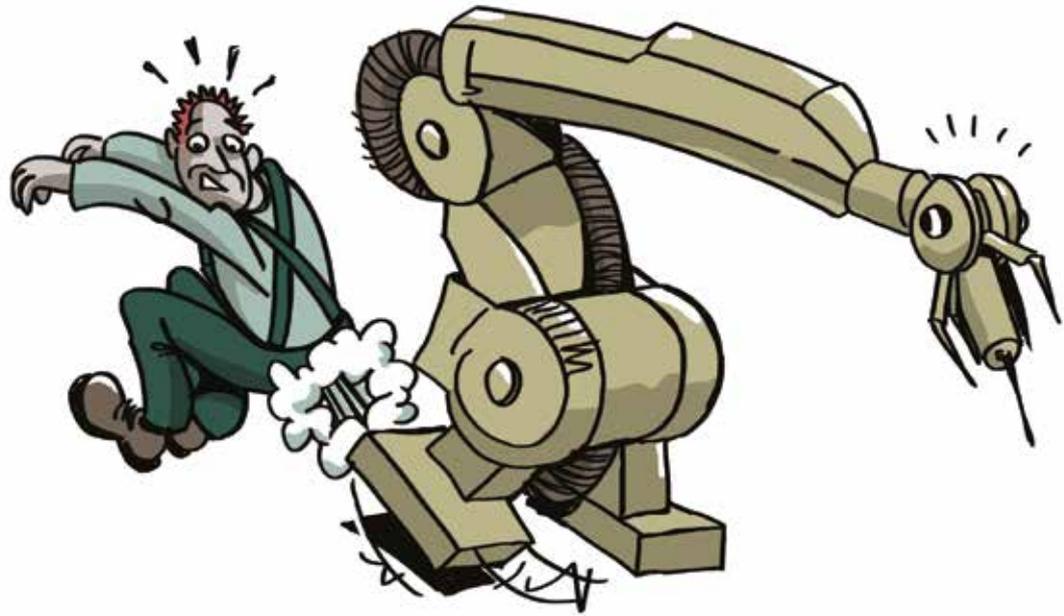
## Fighting the fear

Attacking safety reps creates a climate of fear in which other workers are less likely to raise legitimate concerns. The result has been the continued plague of hidden, long-term occupational diseases from cancer, respiratory problems and musculoskeletal disorders to stress and other mental health conditions. Workers' Memorial Day acts as an annual reminder of the devastation caused when profit is considered more important than the safety of workers.



# GHT to safety

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We should remember that nothing in the world ever changes for the better just because it should. Progress happens because human beings make a fuss. Over 100 years ago, Victorian factory inspectors identified that asbestos was killing people; scientists confirmed this time and again throughout the twentieth century. But it took construction workers on the Barbican refusing to install the deadly fibre, libel cases and staff in schools across the country to collectively decide to refuse to work with asbestos, before the politicians took notice.

It was only in 1999, after a high profile campaign by trade unions and safety campaigners, that the UK finally banned the importation of asbestos. During the intervening decades, hundreds of thousands of workers suffered slow painful deaths.

Despite 40 years of the SRSC regulations, in some ways we are now going backwards. The complete lack of legal rights for the ever-increasing precarious workforce is a regression to the condi-

tions of early industrial capitalism, turning those forced to work via employment agencies, on zero hours contracts, false self-employment or in the gig economy into second class citizens when it comes to employment rights and workplace safety.

On my desk at work I have a purple sticker that reads 'casualisation kills'. It was produced by the Simon Jones Memorial Campaign in 1998 after a young student was killed on his first day at work in Shoreham docks. Nearly 20 years later, the deregulation of many of the functions previously carried out by the HSE, means that the docks are now considered a low risk sector where the employers effectively police themselves.

## Collective power

We need to remind ourselves that we are not just safety reps: We are *union* safety reps. Our strength comes from working collectively with our co-workers, not from our ability to quote the law. The more we see ourselves as an integral part of the

trade union movement and concentrate our energies on consciously involving workers in safety initiatives, the more likely we are to achieve fundamental change.

## We all count

At our best, unions are part of a wider movement to improve the living conditions for working people by bringing about fundamental change in issues such as fairness, equality and the environment.

Every trade union safety rep, the Construction Safety Campaign, Families Against Corporate Killers (FACK), the asbestos victims' networks, all those who participated in the Hazards movement; every single one of you have played a part in improving the society we live in.

On the 40th anniversary of safety reps, take pride in what we have achieved together but never forget in boardrooms profit counts and gets counted, not bodies. You don't get given health and safety, you fight for and win it.



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