

Safety is better organised

Owen Tudor reports on a remarkable official study that examined what makes some Irish construction sites safer than others.

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The presence of a safety representative is the only factor which is significantly related to safety behaviours," is the sort of sentence *Hazards* prints all the time. But this time it's a quote from an official research report on the website of the Health and Safety Authority, Ireland's HSE.

It comes from a study, *Safety behaviour in the construction sector*, commissioned by the Authority and its Northern Ireland equivalent, the HSENI. They compared actual injury rates and examples of safety behaviour with the perceptions of construction site workers and management, the risk management system and safety

enforcement.

They found "the variable with the strongest relationship with safety compliance is the presence or absence of a safety representative. A safety representative on site is associated with better compliance... safety representatives are associated with a greater likelihood of reporting risky situations and a lower likelihood of simply continuing to work in such situations. The presence of a safety representative is also strongly related to the effectiveness of response to audits and reported hazards.

"This pattern of relationships suggests that safety representatives are the most important influence on the association between effectiveness of response to audits and hazards and safety compliance."

It isn't just that safety reps are the best way to improve safety, either – the research

found that virtually nothing else had much effect.

The authors say "what is most eloquent about these results is the lack of any other significant relationships. In particular, the general safety management factor is not significantly associated with effective response to audits and hazards and has no influence on behaviour or compliance."

The report ascribes the success of safety reps in particular to:

- ◆ Pressing management to do what they said they were going to do;
- ◆ encouraging workers to report hazards; and
- ◆ communicating effectively with the workers, including advising them against unsafe practices.

The study found "safety representatives are playing the critical role both in ensuring there is an effective response to audits and hazards and translating this into better compliance with safety requirements. They also influence workers to re-

port risky situations and discourage simply continuing to work in risky situations...

"The role of safety representatives in ensuring the job goes smoothly, in facilitating communication, hazard reporting, and playing a strong informal disciplinary role was repeatedly highlighted in the interviews. Their ability to inspire trust and confidence amongst fellow workers on site is illustrated in the following quotes: 'If you approach them in the right manner they will listen to you,' 'you need to communicate the message to young inexperienced staff'."

The report recommended that "all sites should have safety representatives and their role and functions should be reinforced as part of the safety management system." By the time the report was released, Ireland had already decided to legislate, and insist that any site over a certain size must have a safety rep.

Fergus Whelan, industrial officer with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), says the report "vindicates everything the construction unions have been saying."

He adds: "The presence of a safety representative is now mandatory on Irish construction sites and we are starting to see the results of real consultation at site level. The research was limited in terms of the number of sites covered but we have no doubt that a more extensive survey would replicate these results."

Safety Behaviour in the Construction Sector by Nick McDonald, Dept of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin and Victor Hrymak, School of Food Science and Environmental Health, DIT, is available on the web at www.hsa.ie/pub/publications/conbehav.pdf



photo: Rory O'Neill, Hoarding, Boston, USA

GET PROTECTED: It's unions that provide the best form of workplace protection, official studies show. Find out more on the *Hazards* website: www.hazards.org/unioneffect

REPS NEED TRAINING

The best trained safety reps get the best results, according to a new TUC report. A survey of safety reps for the report, *Training and action in health and safety*, found that after attending the advanced Stage II 10-day course, 89 per cent of safety reps had initiated health and safety initiatives on returning to work.

But the numbers were far lower for those who had only completed the Stage I introductory 10-day course. However, the research found only 40 per cent of reps had completed Stage II training. TUC general secretary John Monks said: "Too many employers are putting their workers' health and their business' reputation at risk because they aren't letting safety reps have the time to get the training they need. Good corporate reputations often depend on good safety reps."

A TUC campaign later this year is intended to ensure more safety reps take up their right to training. The TUC will also press HSE to ensure employers fulfil their legal obligation for release with pay, and to publicise safety reps' rights to training with pay.

Training and action in health and safety: the impact of TUC education and training on the workplace activity of health and safety representatives, by Professor David Walters and Peter Kirby, TUC, 2002, £5 from TUC Publications, tel. 020 7739 3539, web: www.tuc.org.uk/publications. Free on the web at: www.tuc.org.uk/learning

UNION REPS WORK

New academic studies are showing the extent of the "union safety effect." Reviewing the evidence, UK professors Phil James and David Walters conclude "a variety of studies, both in this country and overseas, have found the collective representation of workers to have beneficial consequences for standards of worker protection, particularly when it operates through trade union channels. In particular, several of these have highlighted the fact that injury rates tend to be highest in workplaces where there is unilateral determination of health and safety by management and lowest where mechanisms of union-based representation are present."

Professors Phil James and David Walters. *Worker representation in health and safety: options for regulatory reform*, Industrial Relations Journal, vol. 33, no. 2, page 141-156, June 2002.

WORKERS WANT REPS

A top Australian union webzine has called for workplace safety to be an organising focus for trade unions. *Workers Online* editor Peter Lewis says occupational health and safety is currently a backwater, "something divorced from the day-to-day activities of industrial negotiations and the forward looking organising agenda...But talk to workers, and it's the issue at the forefront of their minds."

He cites a recent poll of members of the construction union CFMEU that "found 71 per cent believed protecting workers' safety was an important union service – way ahead of wages and conditions."

Lewis adds: "Where unionism is weak the safety rep structure provides a way in. Where unions are already strong these new structures are a way to engage members with campaigns that actually mean something." He concludes: "Perhaps the time has come to mainstream work safety – recognise it's a hot issue for workers and therefore fertile ground for organising," introducing a new generation to trade unions.

LHMU "union active" campaign sticker, Australia



Safety reps at work

Going up? PCS reps have been using the new Union Inspection Notices (UINs – Hazards 76) to negotiate safety improvements – and have found sometimes just the threat of a notice is enough. Somerset House PCS safety rep Maria Dobinson-Dines tackled a problem with tardy maintenance contractor Mapeley, getting a faulty lift fixed within the two days stipulated on a UIN form.

Maria said: "The UIN, as well as being a good tool for the union, can also be a good tool for management as they can use it to push things through. Management weren't happy with the situation either as they were walking up the stairs too."

In another workplace, the threat of a UIN over unemptied toilet sanitary bins did the trick. Westminster Council's Environmental Health Unit had advised a PCS rep to cite the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 in a UIN. The bins were emptied before this step needed to be taken.

www.hazards.org/notices

Getting about: Banking union UNIFI and Barclays Bank have agreed a new system of full-time regional union health and safety reps covering the whole of the bank's UK operations. Following a highly successful pilot scheme in the North, the network has been expanded, with a full-time health and safety rep based in each of five geographical regions.

UNIFI rep Kevin Armstrong, who ran the pilot scheme, said for the first time in the finance sector "health and safety will have a full time local presence in every part of the UK." He added: "The job of the reps will be to work with the bank to promote, monitor and improve health and safety at the workplace level."

The UNIFI regional reps will audit sites, providing advice and support to staff and managers and represent staff in health and safety consultations.