Each year 25,000 people are forced out of their jobs by work-related ill-health, says the UK government. It wouldn’t have ended this way if they left it to the expert— you. Union research is the best way to track down workplace ill-health and find the solutions to Britain’s privatized coal mines.

Whatever the condition, you can bet workers spotted work-related ill-health before anyone else cottoned on (Hazards 60). Sometimes problems stem from poor research, sometime from the absence of research. More often than not is because it no-one either cares or values the opinion of the workers doing the risky jobs.

Listen to me

Good stuff can happen. A study in New York State found there were tens of thousands of preventable cases of occupational disease and thousands of deaths each year, and allocated US$1 million to kick off a campaign (page 8).

What to do

Do-It-Yourself research can vary from a quick show of hands in the canteen — if this tells you what you need to know, why waste your time doing more? — to a full worker-controlled scientific study. Studies with full worker participation, sometimes with the assistance of “experts”, sometimes without, have two major advantages: they work better; and they are more likely to lead to efforts to address the cause of any problems. 1.2.3.4.

Many researchers have found that “Participatory Action Research” (PAR) or “workers’ epidemiology” — number crunching to link ill-health to tasks — is highly effective. Occupational stress groups led by shop stewards “showed significant improvements in practically all measures of psychological well-being in comparison to controls”, a review reported. “Behavioural changes and initiatives taken to improve the workplace were also reported in group interviews.” 7

A US government report on worker involvement in stress prevention reported “Employee involvement in decisions affecting their work situation can capitalise on their unique and relevant expertise. Indeed, the person doing the job often has the best knowledge of the problem elements and insights into solutions.” 10

Other reports acknowledge that “when it comes to their health, workers always know best.” 11 Participatory research should obey simple rules 12.13:

- Workers should have input into the research questions to be asked;
- The results and their implications should be made accessible to groups affected by exposures;
- There should be increased worker participation in the research process;
- There should be greater accuracy of data, taking account of workers’ experiences and subjective symptoms.

Get informed

There are two main types of research, “active” and “passive”. Active research involves going out and looking for a problem, through studies, surveys and other investigations. Passive research involves reviewing existing information sources, compensation records, accident reports or sick leave patterns. Some UK unions have evaluated problems like occupational cancer using union death benefit payout records, for example. Follow your instincts, but follow up any detective work. If you have a suspicion there is a problem, ask your union safety department — there’s a good chance it will have heard similar concerns raised before. You can also get support from a network of sympathetic occupational health registers, so if workers are exposed to carcinogens, there’s a good chance they’ll be on the worker list.

And check out the standard sources, Hazards fact sheets or TUC’s Hazards at work files. If you are online, you can access information including Hazards at work on the TUC’s safety website at www.tuc.org.uk. The Hazards website at www.hazards.org includes a listing of fact sheets.

References:
17. Email info and map software can be downloaded free from the US Centers for Disease Control website: www.cdc.gov/epinfo/