

# ORGANISE!

SO YOU KNOW THE JOB IS DANGEROUS. WHAT NOW?

HAZARDS FACTSHEET 74

You slip, trip, fall. You are exposed to toxic chemicals. You lift, you carry, you get strains. You are stressed to the eyeballs. All of this and the law says you should be safe and healthy at work. Mick Holder looks at how safety reps can organise to close the reality gap on workplace safety.

**U**NION workplaces are safer workplaces. This isn't a matter of chance or because unions are only to be found in safer firms. It is because unions provide the voice, skills and the workplace muscle needed to secure improvements.

Where unions negotiate on safety issues workplaces are twice as safe. Where employers won't negotiate in good faith, unions can use their collective strength to demand improvements (see right).

Unions have used techniques from strikes, to boycotts of dangerous substances and processes (*Hazards 11*), from refusing dangerous work (page 25), to national and local safety campaigns (*Hazards 64*), to canteen sit-down protests, to press for safety improvements.

But to effectively secure these improvements, a safety rep must have the support of an informed and involved membership.

## Safety strategy

**Get trained:** Safety representatives need skills and need to be trained. Some of the skills needed are interviewing members, investigating accidents, researching information, taking notes, negotiating changes locally or meeting senior management, giving verbal reports, prioritising work, tackling problems systematically. Safety reps have a legal right to time off for routine and more specialised trade union safety courses (see page 22 this issue; *Hazards 61*).

**Investigate:** Safety reps represent their members on health, safety, welfare and even environmental issues. Talk to members about the problems they have with the work they do, possibly using surveys, body mapping or risk mapping (see *Hazards 71*).

**Network:** New reps need to be in touch with other union reps in the firm. This is to ensure they know what is going on within the union and what issues are being raised with the boss in the workplace as a whole. They also need to find out



Photo: Alan Dalton

**DOWN TOOLS:** Construction workers at this site in Edmonton, north London, stopped work for a few hours after a fatal accident on the site. The result of involving the workers in this mass action led a few days later to a wide range of trade union demands being put forward.

about the management of the organisation and how this links with the union and safety reps.

**Communicate:** It is good practice to have a poster or a leaflet given out at work by the employer, telling all workers who their safety rep is and who is responsible on the management side. More creative forms of communication can pay dividends too... many unions communicate with safety reps via the internet. And some local unions run internal websites, telling members which rep is responsible for what in which area (*Hazards 72*).

Safety reps should know the:

- Local union structure at work, including any convenors, deputies, reps with special responsibilities such as equal opportunities or union training;
- management structures at work, including who is ultimately in charge, the safety officer, any occupational health staff;
- people with special responsibilities, including first aiders, fire officers, rescue teams;
- local union branch, including where it meets and when; and
- local trades council, including where it meets and when and who is delegated from your union to sit on it.

**Represent all the members:** Reps must treat all their members fairly and be sensitive to issues that may arise which affect any one group of workers - for example women, religious or racial groups, workers with a disability, young workers or those who work outside normal hours such as cleaners and security staff. Representing everyone fairly makes for a stronger union. Health and safety is one of the main reasons people join unions, so the higher the profile, the better.

Safety reps must make sure they know exactly who they represent as they may not represent all workers, members of other unions or non-union workers. They should know how and when to raise issues with both the management and unions,



**BRANCH OUT:** Nursing assistants and domestic staff talking at a union meeting at a west London hospital.

when to expect action and any appeals or grievance procedures.

## Use your rights

**Safety committees:** Safety committees with full union involvement make the workplace much safer. However, safety committees are also notorious for being world class talking shops. Give yours a health check to make sure it is doing its job.

**Safety policy:** All employers are required to have a safety policy stating their commitment to safety and setting out detail of the organisation and arrangements in the business to secure a safe and healthy workplace. Get hold of it; improve it.

**Risk assessments:** The method that employers must use to ensure a safe and healthy workplace is called "risk assessment" - and it isn't rocket science. Employers must look at jobs done, identify any potential problems and who might be affected, review what they do to prevent injury and act to ensure that nothing goes wrong (*Hazards 44*). Safety reps must be consulted by employers when they are doing risk assessments.

**Accident reporting:** Employers are required to have a system for employees to record any accidents,

normally called the accident book. Accident and incident statistics give safety reps a good indication of what is going on in the workplace - as long as everyone is reporting them.

**The law:** Lots of laws deal with health and safety at work, but don't let this put you off. Safety reps should never lose sight of what they think is wrong at the workplace and how they think it should be improved. The law should be considered a tool to help negotiate improvements, and not relied on exclusively to solve the problem. It is rarely enough on its own.

**Consultation:** Employers must consult with safety reps on all issues that may affect the health, safety and welfare of employees - and they must do it in good time. So telling a rep a new computer system has just arrived is not "consultation in good time". Reps and employees should be involved in any changes at the workplace from the planning stage onwards, through purchase and into implementation.

## Essential information

*Hazards Magazine* (see page 31).  
www.hazards.org  
TUC Hazards at Work file. Details from TUC, Congress House, Great Russell St, London WC1B 3LS. Tel: 020 7636 4030.  
www.tuc.org.uk/h\_and\_s/  
TUC safety e-zine: Available from mid-May 2001. Sign up at the TUC safety webpage.

## The union effect

Responsible employers will work with unions to promptly remedy safety concerns. The workplaces with full union recognition and joint health and safety committees are the safest of all, more than twice as safe as those with no union or committee (*Hazards 58*). Similar findings have been reported in the US and elsewhere (*Hazards 66*).

But not all employers are responsible and not all treat your health and welfare with the priority it deserves. Unions sometimes have to make these employers listen.

A 1999 report from the TUC found that health and safety trailed just behind pay and redundancies as the top reason for industrial action ballots (*Hazards 67*). And new research says traditional industrial action works.

A London School of Economics discussion paper last year said "strikes and slow-downs serve as efficacious union tools for reducing workplace injuries," concluding: "Even if unions and management quarrel over all the other issues, labour possesses vital, tacit, shopfloor knowledge regarding health and safety, knowledge that is imperative for reducing accidents" (*Hazards 73*).

## Sitting down, standing up, walking out

Case histories of creative union action include:

**SIT DOWN PROTEST:** Bad seating in a police control room was causing backache for civilian employees - but the cop in charge didn't see why he should spend money on seating. UNISON members in the Kent police branch started to put their bad back symptoms in the accident book each shift as soon as they felt them, then took time off work sick. In less than two weeks the necessary improvements were made.

**GAS OFF:** Railway train crew had been refused telephones that they could use to be in touch when out of sight of each other, from the front to the back of a long gas container train. The RMT Eastleigh branch members were expected to load excess gas from the Dorset oil wells. The union's demands were quickly met when members refused to load the gas, a move that could have the shut down of the oil field.

**DIVINE INTERVENTION:** Workers, tired of protracted negotiation with their employer over bad safety standards, produced flyers highlighting the employer's legal breaches. The handouts were distributed at the church where the employer was a prominent member.

**CHECK OFF:** Women at a Lancashire supermarket refused to operate new, unsuitable checkouts. The GMB members at the ASDA supermarket felt that standing for up to four hours at a time was a serious risk to their health and would lead to painful back conditions and swollen feet (*Hazards 43*). The workers were backed by the public. Four weeks of negotiations achieved nothing. A few days of standing up for their rights won an acceptable compromise.

**SAFETY FIRST:** Remember, industrial action is a big step and the UK's anti-union laws are some of the worst around. Take advice from union colleagues and union officers on the most effective way to proceed.