

Yeah, you've dealt with the chemicals and the ergonomics, you are waist deep in risk assessments and the health and safety committee is tackling everything from soft toilet rolls to hard hats. And you still feel like a zombie.

A February 2002 TUC report, *About time: a new agenda for shaping working life*, says the UK tops the European long hours league, and is the only country that allows staff to opt out of the 48 hour limit, introduced across the European Union as a health and safety measure. And not only is this bad for the workers, it is bad for the economy too.

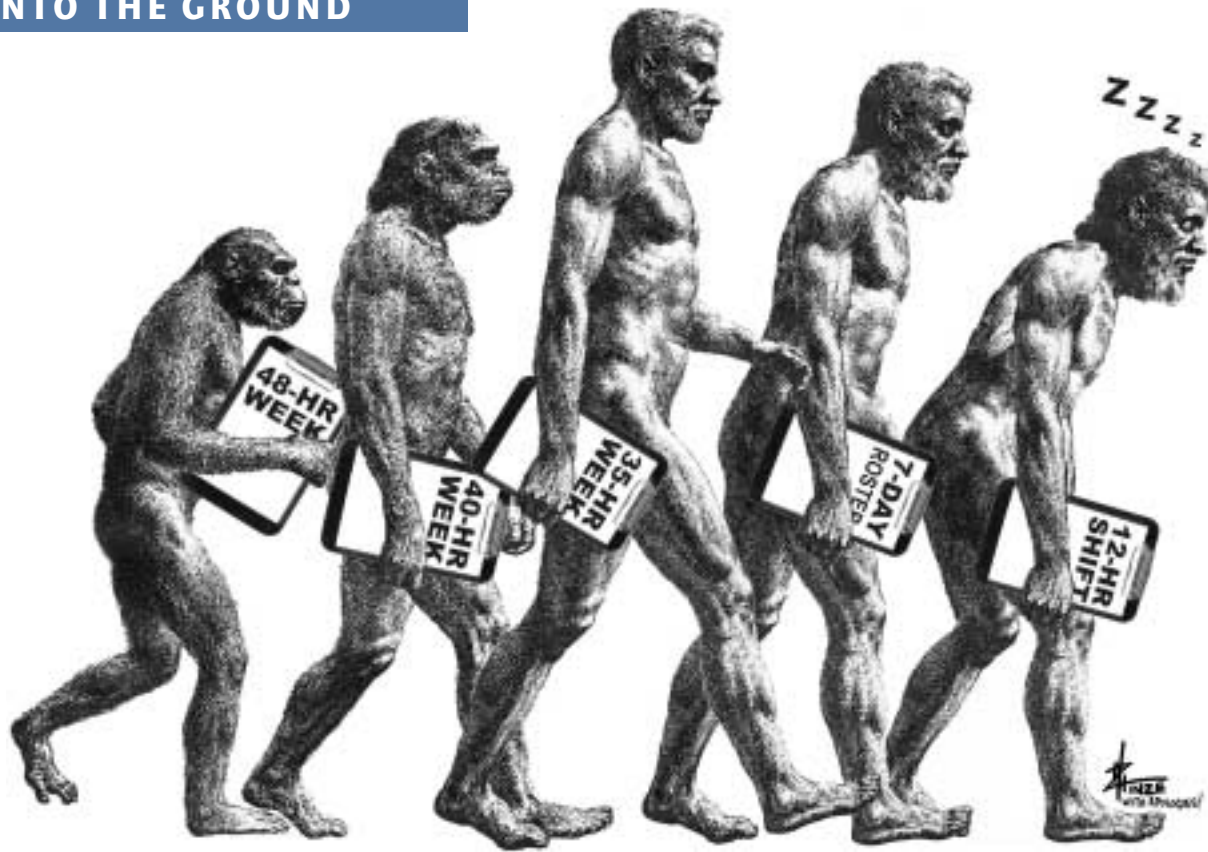
TUC general secretary John Monks said: "Britain's long hours culture is a national disgrace. It leads to stress, ill-health and family strains. But even worse it's an indictment on how badly we manage work in the UK... Other countries produce more, earn more and work far shorter hours. We should, and can, do the same, if employers, unions and government work together."

He's right. And this shouldn't be news to either the Health and Safety Executive or the government. *Industrial fatigue*, a report for the Home Office presented in 1916 to HM Chief Inspector of Factories Sir Arthur Whitelegge, noted that output "is lowered by the working of overtime. The diminution is often so great that the total daily output is less when overtime is worked than when it is suspended. Thus overtime defeats its own object."

The report adds: "Members of the office staff may show signs of fatigue and overstrain equally with the factory hands."



**INDUSTRIAL FATIGUE**  
The government has known since 1916 that overworking doesn't work, it just makes us sick.



## Work breakdown

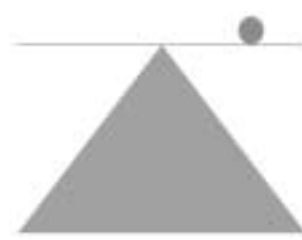
A lifetime later, the lesson still hasn't been learned. TUC figures released in February 2002 show union compensation claims for work-related stress have increased 12-fold, up to 6,428 cases in the year (*Hazards 77*).

A paper published last year in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* noted that work effort had intensified over the last two decades. Another 2001 report concluded that for UK workers at least – and especially women – those that got promoted were the ones who worked the overtime [DTI work-life balance – key facts].

Escalating pace and volume of work is adversely affecting our physical and mental health, leading to stress, strain, burnout and ill-health (*Hazards 69, 75*). It can drive us to drink and drugs and away from our families (*Hazards 77*). A September 2001 study for the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) concluded suicide attempts, family breakdown and physical illness are some of the effects of extreme working hours. Work, for many here and abroad, just isn't working.

## Union solutions

Unions worldwide are developing strategies so work doesn't take over our lives.



**Changing times:** The TUC's guide to work-life balance includes an eight point process:

1. Developing joint working
2. Teambuilding and project planning
3. Involving staff
4. Involving customers
5. Trying out ideas
6. Widening horizons
7. Developing solutions
8. Practical results and evaluation.

More: [www.hazards.org/getalife](http://www.hazards.org/getalife)



**Workload campaign:** Canadian public sector union CUPE's workload campaign includes an online, step-by-step guide to tackling excessive workload, including a workplace survey tool. The union pulls together good contract language, news and background briefings. The union urges workplace union reps to:

- ◆ Challenge the power of management to pressure, encourage or allow employees to be overloaded at work
- ◆ Remind employers of their obligation under health and safety legislation to take all reasonable precautions for a safe workplace
- ◆ Pressure government safety inspectors to look seriously at the effects of chronic work overload, and to devise strategies to address the problem
- ◆ Act collectively to ensure safe workloads and working arrangements
- ◆ Begin local community debates about the health and safety (and social) consequences of excessive workloads and working hours.

More: [www.hazards.org/getalife](http://www.hazards.org/getalife)

## Reasonable hours: ACTU It's about time for a balance campaign

Australian union federation ACTU's "lunch 'n' learn" kit is designed to "help organisers/activists to conduct a discussion that concentrates on the problems of unreasonable working time and paves the way for action."

Background notes for a lunch break discussion cover the impact of excessive hours in the workplace, how workers feel about the problem, and how to get involved. Resources for "an active way forward" include:

- ◆ Potential collective activities – ideas on how to achieve reasonable hours
- ◆ Reasonable hours survey – find out the impact of excessive hours in your workplace
- ◆ Daily working hours audit sheet – calculate how many hours you are donating to your boss.

The ACTU kit also includes occupational health and safety guidelines for shiftwork and extended working hours, "intended for use by employees and by union and other employee representatives who have to deal with changes to working arrangements."

More: [www.hazards.org/getalife](http://www.hazards.org/getalife)



## Benchmarking:

**CAW working conditions study**  
Members of Canadian auto union CAW took strike action over "lean and mean" production methods. The union HQ developed its own "benchmarking" system on working conditions, something ignored in the company's own production-oriented system.

Unlike traditional benching, CAW "benchmarked":

- ◆ workload or change in workload
- ◆ physical risks
- ◆ stress risks
- ◆ autonomy/control
- ◆ relations with management.

CAW proved work was too fast, too awkward, too painful and too insecure – and it was getting worse. CAW's website also includes guides to help "Fight speed up" and "Work reorganisation: Responding to lean production."

More: [www.hazards.org/getalife](http://www.hazards.org/getalife)

## Strategies

There's no single right way to win improvements... be creative.

**Campaigns:** Unions worldwide are developing work-life balance campaigns, many stressing the health and safety implications of too much, too intense, too inflexible work. UK unions have pushed for a new stress law (*Hazards 71*). The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, which launched its own "get a life" campaign this year, encouraged its members to take time out to do "absolutely nothing". NZCTU president Ross Wilson said: "The concept of doing absolutely nothing for 15 minutes would leave workers refreshed and relaxed and could only have a good impact on their work." Australian unions have taken a long hours test case to the courts.

**Compensation:** Despite the legal difficulties (page 19), compensation claims for stress-related ill-health can cost employers hundreds of thousands of pounds and focus the attention of managers (*Hazards 75*). Unions have won claims for workers who have suffered breakdowns and for the families of over-stretched workers who have taken their own lives (*Hazards 69*). In Korea, chronic fatigue syndrome caused by work-related fatigue and stress is a recognised occupational disease (*Hazards 75*). In Canada, sleep disruption and exhaustion caused by switching shifts has been compensated (page 11).

**Safe staffing:** Californian nursing unions have won "safe staffing laws" (*Hazards 73*). Washington state may soon follow. If it is possible in the US, it is possible almost anywhere.

**Industrial action:** Action over under-staffing and overload is not uncommon. Use health and safety evidence to strengthen your arguments.

**Enforcement action:** Too much to do is a hazard at work. Overwork can cause stress and strains, and can mean you can't possibly do the job right. The Health and Safety Executive ordered two nuclear industry companies to stop planned staff reductions and to tackle excessive working hours because of safety concerns (*Hazards 69*).

## Information

**Hazards get-a-life webpages** Find a wide range of union resources from across the world, together with latest news on decent work.  
[www.hazards.org/getalife](http://www.hazards.org/getalife)

**Trades Union Congress Changing Times webpages**  
The TUC undertakes policy and practical work and produces a wide range of publications on work-life balance, flexible working, and family friendly policies. You can request a publications list by phoning 020 7467 1294. [www.tuc.org.uk/changingtimes](http://www.tuc.org.uk/changingtimes)

**DTI Work-Life Balance Team** Guides show how innovative companies have used policies to reduce absenteeism, boost productivity and reduce long hours, including case histories. DTI, 1 Victoria Street, London SW1 0ET. Tel: 020 7925 5415. [www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance](http://www.dti.gov.uk/work-lifebalance)

**New Ways to Work** New Ways to Work is an independent educational charity that promotes job sharing and other flexible working. Level 4, 26 Shackwell Lane, London E8 2EZ. Tel: 020 7503 3283. Information/advice line: 020 7503 3578. email: [info@new-ways.co.uk](mailto:info@new-ways.co.uk) [www.new-ways.co.uk](http://www.new-ways.co.uk)

**The Work Foundation** Has information about work-life balance, including a video produced jointly with the TUC (trade union rates available). Peter Runge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5DG. Tel: 0870 165 6700. [www.theworkfoundation.com](http://www.theworkfoundation.com)

**Parents at Work** Information and advice, including publications. 45 Beech Street, Barbican, London EC2Y 8AD. Tel: 020 7628 2128/3578. email: [info@parentsatwork.org.uk](mailto:info@parentsatwork.org.uk) [www.parentsatwork.org.uk](http://www.parentsatwork.org.uk)

## Overload, overload

Canadian public sector union CUPE has a high profile campaign for family-friendly, human-friendly work.

It says work overload includes:

- ◆ Long and difficult hours
- ◆ Unreasonable work demands
- ◆ Pressure to work overtime (paid and unpaid)
- ◆ Fewer rest breaks, days off and holidays
- ◆ Faster, more pressured work pace
- ◆ Performance monitoring
- ◆ Unrealistic expectations
- ◆ Additional, often inappropriate, tasks imposed on top of "core" duties (doing more than one job)
- ◆ No replacements during sick leaves or vacations

CUPE says union reps must recognise overload is a health and safety issue and can cause serious problems, including:

- ◆ Stress
- ◆ Musculoskeletal disorders
- ◆ Fatigue and related accidents
- ◆ Exhaustion
- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Gastrointestinal disorders
- ◆ Increased exposure to health and safety hazards such as noise, temperature extremes and hazardous chemicals