

Thoroughly modern militancy

For years union negotiators have seen work organisation as a matter of organising shifts and work processes to maximise pay. Jon Richards of the public sector union UNISON says Europe's unions are now searching for solutions that improve all aspects of the working world, including health and safety.

Late last year, the European union federation ETUC's safety research arm (TUTB) co-organised a "Working Without Limits" conference.

Speakers identified work environment problems brought on by casualisation, from new hi-tech industries at one end to sub-contracted services at the other. These were linked to work intensification and worker ill-health.

French researcher Annie Thebaud-Mony said working conditions and the intensification of work had been neglected by unions, more concerned with "industrial peace".

She added that this had allowed a growth in the use of temporary staff and flexible working, and increased use of sub-contracting, transferring risks to less organised workforces. Women are particularly affected, having had part time work foisted upon them as they are forced to balance family and work (also see: Not what we bargained for, *Hazards* 69).

Union-backed Swedish research body SALTSA, a co-organiser of the conference, proposed "sustainable work

systems". Quality of work (including worker health), organisation, and the environment would be given equally high importance. Growth would develop through learning, sustainable development, dialogue with other organisations and economising on natural resources.

Annie Thebaud-Mony argued that new occupational health forces are needed to challenge multinationals, linking the two ends of the production process and focussing on international sectors rather than individual workplaces. These are building in the form of international networks of co-operation between grass roots movements, unions and professionals and researchers.

Unions need their own ways of evaluating working

conditions, as current methods are geared towards the different priorities of employers. Many hidden workplace hazards have only been uncovered because unions were more motivated to fully investigate risks.

Using occupational risk legislation Spanish union federation CC.OO in Catalonia devised interventions aimed at individual employers and used workers' ideas, involvement, negotiation and, where necessary, reference to the labour authorities. This led to changes in work organisation, increases in staffing and reduced staff turnover. The union has also been able to negotiate with employers to put work organisation into general risk assessments. It was the power of collective action that led to changes.

Europe also faces the challenge of an ageing workforce. A Finnish study which looked at adjustments to the physical and psychosocial environment, including workload and recovery periods, positive attitudes to age-management, flexible and team working found changes produced benefits including greater staff well-being and quality of life and lowered absence rates.

There are common hazards everywhere - increasing workloads, cost-cutting, privatisation, sub-contracting and increased flexibility dictated by employers.

These new hazards go largely ignored by statutory safety enforcement authorities. Better enforcement combined with participatory approaches, risk assessment and prevention, better information provision and more and better occupational health services (OHS) are part of the answer. For now, employers are failing to comply with safety laws, particularly where the workplace presents complex problems.

Unions need to set new strategies. Negotiation and agreements are useful but there is a risk of losing health and safety amongst other demands such as pay. Also negotiations are sensitive to changes in power relations and cover only organised workers.

There is potential in the Framework Directive - the common safety law underpinning national standards in all European Union countries including the UK - for more effective risk assessment, workers' participation and OH services.

Wanted! Fresh thinking

Benchmarking: 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 (*Hazards* 51). UK union CWU won a national strike to block Royal Mail's "brain-washing" new management techniques.

In 1999, HSE issued guidance on health and safety benchmarking (*Hazards* 68).

Work breaks: US government researchers found that when workers have more rest breaks, production quality and quantity remains the same, and the workers suffer far fewer work-related symptoms (*Hazards* 71).

Safer staffing: California has introduced "safe staffing" legislation, setting minimum staff to patient ratios. Health union SEIU has issued a staffing levels guide for reps. A study last year

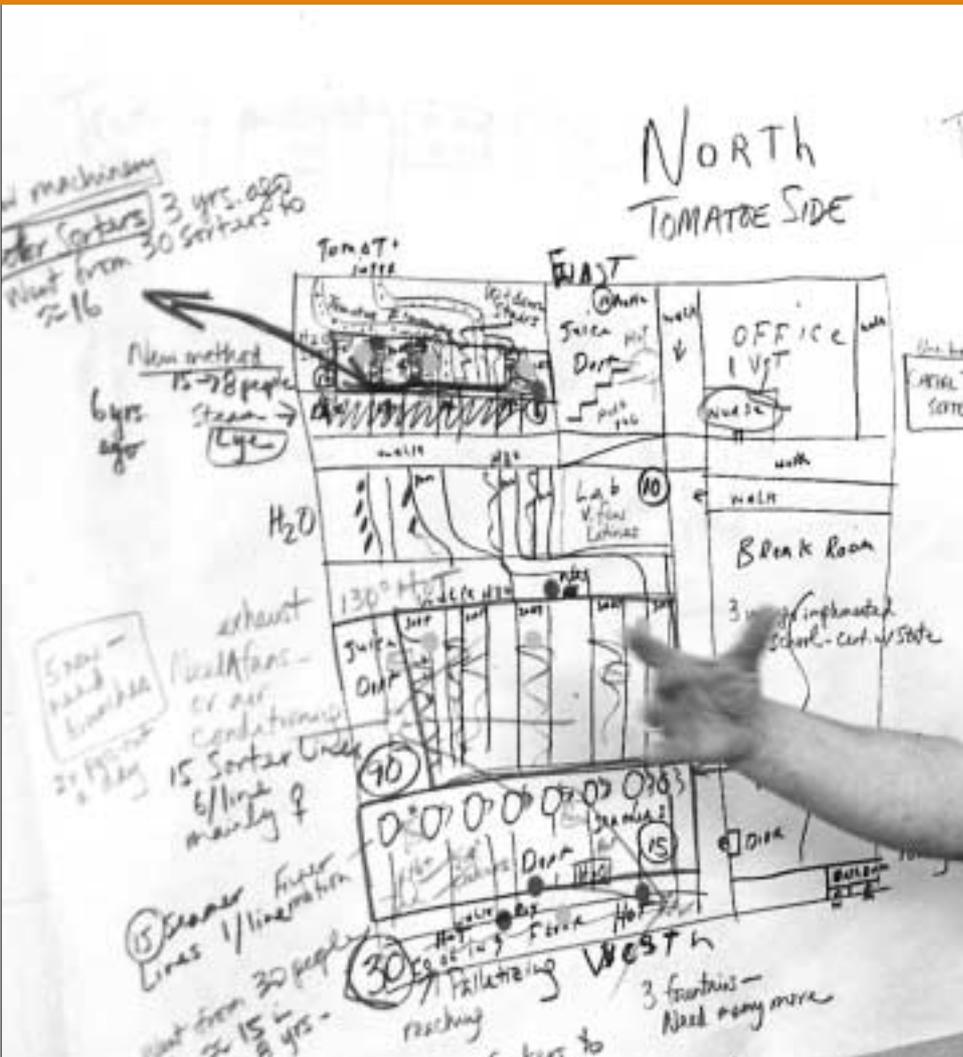


photo: Rory O'Neill

Worked over in the UK's workplaces

UK workers have too much work, too much stress, with too few workers working too long hours, a TUC survey of 9,000 safety reps has found.

The November 2000 TUC report, *Focus on health and safety*, shows stress is the number one concern for two out of three safety reps (66 per cent) and is the main concern across almost all industrial sectors.

Heavy workloads are cited as the main cause of stress (74 per cent) followed by cuts in staff (53 per cent). Safety reps say long hours are a more significant cause of stress than two years ago (up to 39 per cent from 28 per cent in 1998).

Bullying is mentioned by 30 per cent of the reps reporting stress as a problem.

The biennial survey asked safety reps to list their top five concerns at work. After stress, back strain is the second concern, reported by 44 per cent of reps. Repetitive strain injuries is placed third (41 per cent).

The TUC is calling on the Health and Safety Executive to draw up standards for tackling excessive workloads, low staffing levels and long hours, against which management performance can be judged. It also wants action plans to cut RSI and back strain.

TUC is also calling for measures that would oblige employers to establish a rehabilitation policy setting out how they will deal with employees injured or made ill at work.

And TUC wants new measures that would mean work injury or disease victims would find it easier to win compensation if their employer has not conducted a sufficient risk assessment at work.

Where's it all going wrong?

Main hazards at work

Hazard	% cited by safety reps in 2000
stress or overwork	66
back strains	44
repetitive strain injuries (RSI)	41
display screen equipment	36
working alone	32

Main causes of workplace stress

Cause	% cited by safety reps in 2000
workloads	74
cuts in staff	53
change at work	44
long hours	39
shiftwork	30
bullying	30

Focus on health and safety, TUC, 2000. £30.00. www.hazards.org (click on TUC)

Unions must engage with and listen to local reps, recognise gender differences, differentiate between workplaces and form new alliances and networks.

Exchange of information is vital if we are going to keep abreast of changes in the world. Email and the internet are fantastic new tools in promoting our struggles. Face-to-face exchanges

still have their uses, though, to stimulate ideas and promote understanding.

Worker safety and the need for organisation will not go away and new industries will not be immune. Ask the workers at Amazon.com who are organising because of stress due to shift changes, job insecurity and mandatory overtime. As ever it will be collective action and the

will of workers that will deliver improvements in their health.

Annie Thebaud-Mony. *Non-standard employment, sub-contracting, flexibility, health.*

Sofia Vega, Narcis Sevilla. *Trade Union involvement in the organisation of work and psychosocial risks in the health sector.*

Detailed versions of these and other presentations can be found on the ETUC/TUTB website: www.etuc.org/tutb
SALISA: www.niwl.se/salisa
Not what we bargained for, *Hazards* 69, Jan-March 2000. www.hazards.org

found that lower hospital staffing levels led to more patient deaths (*Hazards* 71). Other studies have shown that downsizing leads to increased staff sickness (*Hazards* 63 and 70). In January 2000, HSE blocked "unsafe" staff reductions in two nuclear power companies (*Hazards* 69).

Global role: International union bodies are taking a lead, negotiating global recognition agreements with multinationals including health, safety and environment clauses, and

are now running international safety campaigns on asbestos, chemicals, strain injuries and other issues (*Hazards* 69).

European works councils: About 200 multinational companies with UK operations are now obliged to consult with their employees and allow worker reps from different countries to meet and exchange information. Studies have shown health and safety is a negotiating issue on over half of all works councils (*Hazards* 57 and 70).