

The union effect

Many people think the primary job of unions is to fight for a better standard of living. Frequently though the battle is more basic, and unions are fighting successfully for their members' lives, writes *Hazards* editor Rory O'Neill.

There is no more natural union function than defending the health and safety of members. It is a reason people join unions and a reason people stay in unions (*Hazards* 64).

When it comes to workplace harm, hygienists might have a measure of it and doctors a diagnosis for it, but only workers with collective power have much chance of doing anything about it. And there is no shortage of up-to-the-minute evidence illustrating this "union safety effect." Organised workplaces are safer workplaces (see right).

University of Arizona professor Herbert Abrams' "Short history of occupational health," published last year in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, notes: "In the US as in other countries, unions assist workers in assessing and understanding

health and safety information, and collective bargaining agreements protect workers who refuse abnormally dangerous assignments or confront management about their health and safety concerns."

As Owen Tudor, health and safety officer with the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC), puts it: "Join a union or your employer will break your legs!"

Risky business

Risks vary by nation. In general, poorer nations have poorer safety records (see pages 14-15). But in a globalised economy, market pressures can also force down safety standards wherever people work, with increasing pressure to risk your life or risk your livelihood.

The merger mania, takeovers, economic restructuring, globalisation and

lean and mean production methods of the new century are already putting workers through the economic blender, with employers switching from a "take it or leave it" approach to job negotiations, to a "take it, or we leave you" stance, with a border hop to the next, more accommodating, nation.

And with penalties for companies' fiscal misdemeanours far out-stripping those for safety crimes, it is little wonder concerns about the welfare of the shareholders come above concerns about the workforce.

Even life is cheap. A five year legal battle involving UK company Cape plc ended this year, with a compensation settlement of £21 million agreed for 7,500 sick, dying and bereaved claimants in South Africa, all victims of Cape's asbestos mining. For multinational Cape, the maximum price for a South African life is £5,250.

For Union Carbide, life came cheaper still. In the eighteen years since its pesticide plant in Bhopal exploded only 14,824 related deaths



have been compensated at a price per corpse averaging £900. Over 400,000 claims have been rejected.

Globalisation could further undermine the standards, legislation and employment protections unions have won. But it might also bring real meaning to labour slogans like "an injury to one, is an injury to all."

The struggle for better conditions now more than ever transcends borders. With over half of the world's largest economies companies, not countries, then international solidarity is, in every sense, a matter of survival for unions.

VCM win A grassroots union campaign has led the government to broaden the definition of occupational diseases caused by an industrial chemical. TRUST, the Chesterfield-based Trade Union Safety Team, has campaigned for the government to update the listing of diseases for which government industrial injury benefits are payable (*Hazards* 64). TRUST had found hundreds of ex-employees of the Staveley Chemicals PVC factory in Derbyshire were developing disease including bladder cancer that were not compensated under the government scheme. In February, Malcolm

Wicks, parliamentary secretary for work, backed many of the TRUST recommendations, and laid before parliament an Industrial Injuries Advisory Council review calling for injuries benefit "to be extended to certain workers in the plastics industry who have developed bladder cancer" and for an "extension of the list of diseases in relation to workers who work with vinyl chloride monomer," the starter chemical for PVC.

Notice taken Workplace inspections by UNISON safety reps that revealed serious flaws in screen work risk assessments have led to official enforcement action.

Despite repeated attempts by the UNISON reps at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) to get information about the workstation assessments, nothing happened. Frustrated, UNISON eventually contacted the Health and Safety Executive. An HSE inspector issued an Improvement Notice, saying the employer was contravening the Health and Safety at Work Act and the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992. MMU must now revise its self-assessment questionnaire, identify all users, identify and ensure the competence of staff

UNION RECRUITS 6,000 BY STANDING UP FOR SAFETY

A lengthy industrial dispute has resulted in the civil service union PCS winning safety improvements and 6,000 new members. In a letter to members, the union says: "By raising the PCS profile as an active, campaigning union, we have won 6,000 new members... bringing in extra income and strengthening us in future negotiations and campaigns on your behalf."

PCS job centre workers had walked out in a series of strikes prompted by management's insistence that protective screens would not be used in the new Jobcentre Plus offices, despite a series of violent incidents including stabbings and a ball and chain attack (*Hazards 77*).

The PCS letter to members says: "Following the PCS campaign, a draft agreement has been achieved with Jobcentre Plus management to end the dispute. The draft agreement contains a number of valuable and important safeguards for staff." PCS negotiators are recommending members accept the agreement in a forthcoming ballot.

Union solutions

Unions have fought for and won safety laws and employment protection, but the union safety effect, evident worldwide, shows that it is the presence of informed and active unions that give the laws real meaning.

There's no single right way to do it. To secure improvements, unions have used methods from strike action to dialogue, ethical trading initiatives to alliances with environmental and human rights groups.

Unions are adapting to the new global realities, finding new ways of organising that

look beyond national borders. There are now in place a slew of company-based international agreements underpinning union rights, including safety and covering millions of workers worldwide.

Unions are of necessity becoming more creative and more inclusive in their organising methods, finding better ways to do their traditional organising role, supplemented by lessons learned from environmental, anti-globalisation and other emerging movements.

In a modern union world, blinkered self-interest amounts to a slow industrial

suicide. Action at the workplace, national and international levels is the only thing that will work for the workers.

There's a new union survival plan. Forget think global, act local. Act now, act everywhere.

References

Rory O'Neill. *When it comes to health and safety, your life should be in union hands*, Labour Education, 2002/1, issue No. 126, ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities.

www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/actrav/new/april28/index.htm

Herbert K. Abrams. *A short history of occupational health*, Journal of Public Health Policy, vol 22, No. 1, 2001.

ICEM, IFBWW and IUF global agreements can be viewed online: www.icem.org, www.ifbww.org and www.iuf.org

responsible for managing the assessment process and implementing control measures, and draw-up an action plan and timetable for assessing the workstations of all users.

UNISON lesson Fareham College has been fined £23,000 after UNISON reps revealed the college had for years required staff to employ unsafe work methods with asbestos. In addition to the fine for four breaches of the Health and Safety at Work Act, Fareham Magistrates Court also ordered the college to pay costs of £18,000 to the HSE. This case was brought to light

by Alan Phillips and Peter White, two UNISON health and safety stewards. "Many maintenance staff were required to drill, cut and move these tiles in the course of their work over 20 years without any protective equipment and clearly were exposed to asbestos dust/fibres," says a statement from the UNISON Southern Region. The court heard that Fareham College "fell far short of its responsibilities to its employees."

Where's the evidence?

"Organised labour has been the essential factor central to most workplace health and safety improvements, from the industrial revolution to the present."

HK. Abrams. *A short history of occupational health*.

"Strikes and slow-downs serve as efficacious union tools for reducing workplace injuries... labour possesses vital, tacit, shopfloor knowledge regarding health and safety, knowledge that is imperative for reducing accident rates."

Adam Seth Litwin. *Trade union and industrial injury in Great Britain*. LSE discussion paper DP0468, August 2000. <http://cep.lse.ac.uk>

In workplaces with full union recognition and a joint management-union safety committee serious accident rates were less than half those at firms with no union recognition and no joint committee.

Barry Reilly, Peirella Paci and Peter Hall. *Unions, safety committees and workplace injuries*. British Journal of Industrial Relations, 33.2, June 1995.

Union supported health and safety committees have a significant impact in reducing injury rates.

Paper for the Canadian Ministries of Labour, 1993. Cited in *Unions make your workplace safer*, Canadian Labour Congress website. www.clc-ctc.ca/health-safety/unions.html

"78-79 per cent of unionised workplaces reported high compliance with health and safety legislation while only 54-61 per cent of non-unionised workplaces reported such compliance."

Ontario Workplace Health and Safety Agency. Cited in *Unions make your workplace safer*, Canadian Labour Congress website

Unionised workplaces were three times as likely to have a health and safety committee, and twice as likely to have undergone a management occupational health and safety audit in the preceding 12 months.

Workplace Relations Survey 1990-1995, Australia

"Effective strategies for involving workers appear to be conditional on a number of variables, most importantly on worker activism and the effective use of formal negotiations."

Michelle Ochsner and Michael Greenberg. *Factors which support effective worker participation in health and safety: A survey of New Jersey industrial hygienists and safety engineers*. Journal of Public Health Policy, volume 19, No.3, 1998.

"Studies in industrial countries indicate that the role of labor unions in ensuring compliance with health and safety standards is often an important one."

World Bank report, 1995