

Dangerous LIVES

The Health and Safety Executive has been hobbled by an unprecedented and savage funding cut. Safety rules are being relaxed. And the government says it's all happening in the name of common sense. Don't you believe it, says *Hazards* editor Rory O'Neill – it's a political project driven by the business lobby and built around dangerous lies.

"Firms will do the RIGHT THING!"

WRONG!

Some do, but enough don't – enough to damage the health of millions of UK workers every year (page 9).

Tens of thousands die each year of work-related cancers (*Hazards* 111). Same again for work-related heart, lung and neurological diseases caused by work. Around 1,000 die each year in work-related road transport accidents.

But scarcely any of these deaths are highlighted in official statistics – the majority aren't even included (*Hazards* 92). The most commonly quoted figure you'll see puts the body count at a couple of hundred work-related fatalities a year.

If they don't count the bodies, the bodies don't count.

"It's a COMPENSATION culture!"

WRONG!

Business says we need a can-do, not a can-sue culture. It's got it. Fewer than one in 10 victims of work-related injuries or ill-health get any sort of compensation.

Government figures show there are now about a third the number of claims for work-related injuries and diseases as there were a decade ago (*Hazards* 111).

And it is not as though they just give compensation away. Claimants have to demonstrate they are suffering and their problems are the result of their employer's negligence.

If businesses want to avoid compensation claims, all they have to do is avoid hurting their staff.

"Safety laws are a BURDEN on BUSINESS!"

WRONG!

Business doesn't pick up the tab for the injuries and diseases caused by work.

An HSE report concluded less than a quarter of the cost to society of occupational ill-health and injury was borne by employers, although they were by and large responsible for the workplace conditions that led to the injury or ill-health (*Hazards* 106). The research found "society" bore most of the cost burden, followed by "individuals."

And when the business lobby rolls out its annual whinge about the costs of health and safety regulation, it omits systematically the far greater financial and other benefits of those laws (*Hazards* 111).

The business lobby's top bugbear is risk assessments, which it complains are petty bureaucracy and a burden.

But if you are too dumb to easily and quickly complete a risk assessment on your own business activities, you are too dumb to run that business.

"Health and Safety's gone MAD!"

WRONG!

That's crazy. The number of health and safety regulations has almost halved since 1974.

Over the last four years the number of forms used by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to collect information from business has dropped from 127 to 54.

And firms are hardly being harangued by meddling inspectors. A decade ago, HSE could be expected to turn up at the average workplace once every few years. Now workplaces are lucky to see an inspector once in a working lifetime (*Hazards* 110) and fewer than 1 in 15 major injuries now results in even an appearance from HSE (*Hazards* 108).

HSE prosecutions and convictions have halved since 2001. Tens of thousands die each year because of a criminal disregard for health and safety at work. Just a few hundred end up in court.

And brutal cuts to HSE's budget and a new hands-off government policy is going to dramatically reduce official oversight of dangerous employers (page 4). That's mad.

"There's no problem in modern workplaces..."

WRONG!

Oh yes there is. More people are harmed by work today than at any time in history.

We've got all the old problems topped off with an epidemic of work-related strain injuries and mental health problems.

Even the government's official estimates acknowledge over 2 million people in the UK are suffering health problems caused by their work, and hundreds of thousands of workers develop a work-related condition each year.

New problems are emerging all the time. It's becoming apparent the microelectronics industry is presenting a serious risk of cancer and other problems (page 22). Nanomaterials could be the next asbestos, but you'd not know it from the rush to manufacture them with precious little regard for the long-term health risks.

Several new occupational diseases have surfaced recently, including Ardstyl syndrome, reactive dye asthma and flock workers' lung in the garment sector and popcorn workers' lung in food manufacture (*Hazards* 101).

And old diseases are affecting new groups of workers – like silicosis in the workers giving your jeans that fashionable worn look (page 12).

"It's just a matter of Common Sense..."

WRONG!

Boardrooms don't care about demonstrating health and safety common sense, they care about demonstrating their profitability (*Hazards* 110).

They have an absolute legal duty to defend the interests of shareholders, but only a heavily qualified "reasonably practicable" legal duty to protect the health and safety of the people they employ.

In this dangerously topsy-turvy system, it's no wonder safety takes a backseat.

That's why the voluntary directors' duties scheme was a total flop (*Hazards* 111); ditto the CHAsPI Corporate Health and Safety Performance Index and other voluntary schemes (page 5).

Resources
For references, background documents and campaign materials, see the *Hazards* website.
www.hazards.org/votetodie
www.hazards.org/deadlybusiness
www.hazards.org/workandhealth

"Come on, OFFICES and small firms never hurt anyone!"

WRONG!

Small firms are over-represented in the most hazardous sectors – construction, agriculture and transport. They are often the ones that benefit most from the support of a properly resourced health and safety enforcement agency.

One of the sectors with the highest rates of reportable injuries is 'public administration' – that's office work.

And violence is a major problem in frontline service industry jobs – including health and social services and retail.

"Self enforcement is the way forward!"

WRONG!

Studies in the UK have established two methods are far-and-away the most effective at delivering safer, healthier workplaces – a credible inspection and enforcement regime and worker participation with active trade union involvement (*Hazards* 110).

Voluntary schemes have been tried and have failed spectacularly. The model comes from the US, where an investigation is underway into abuses of their ineffective Voluntary Protection Programme (VPP) and inflated claims of its usefulness. The official focus is instead shifting to inspection and enforcement.

In Ireland, the introduction of a copycat VPP scheme was followed by a dramatic increase in workplace deaths. After it switched back to a system based on inspections, workplace deaths fell to a record low.

There are two other problems with leaving firms to police themselves. Without preventive inspections, HSE will be unable to uncover rogue employers, particularly those exposing their workers to slow-burn health risks like occupational cancers.

And if HSE isn't policing the rogues, the prospect of justice after their criminal breaches of health and safety law disappears entirely.

