

A vertical column of five circles on the left side of the page. The top circle is yellow, matching the header. The second and fourth circles are a dark purple. The third circle is white, serving as a background for the main title. The bottom two circles are a medium purple.

ORGANISING FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY: SAFETY REPS COURSE

Building organising unions

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This course is designed to help union branches to organise for health and safety at the workplace. It can be used by tutors as part of a course or by workplace reps to help plan recruitment of new safety reps and to improve workplace efforts on health and safety.

Health and safety is a priority for unions and the union contribution to safe workplaces is measurable and considerable. Research shows that better standards of health and safety are achieved in unionised workplaces than in similar non-unionised ones. In union surveys, health and safety is regularly identified as one of the single most important issues for members and for workers.

Aims

This course will help you to:

- identify and develop new safety reps
- improve the effectiveness of the safety committee
- build union membership through better organisation.

The organising approach

An organising union is built on high membership involvement, high levels of union activity in the workplace and encouraging members to participate rather than getting the union to sort things out. It includes:

- involving members in identifying issues, finding solutions and dealing with problems
- increasing the number of confident, trained reps and safety reps who are representative of the workplace they come from
- working together rather than leaving it to the union
- improving negotiating strength
- dealing with problems early, when they are manageable, rather than leaving them to get worse.

The importance of safety reps

In a study in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* in June 1995, it was reported that:

- Where there was full union recognition and joint committees, the serious injury rate was 5.3 per 1,000 workers.
- Where there was no union recognition and no joint committees, the serious injury rate was 10.9 per 1,000 workers.

Recent research by the Health and Safety Executive showed that safety reps were better informed about workplace health and safety issues than their managers.

And John Prescott, the former Deputy Prime Minister, said, “I wish some newspapers would record the tremendous work that 200,000 safety reps do to prevent accidents at work, where the rate of serious injury is half that in non-union firms.”

For further information advice and guidance on workers involvement go to the HSE website www.hse.gov.uk/involvement/index

Attracting workers into the union

Safety reps have direct relationships with union members and can make an excellent case for union membership. They can explain the case for unions and the value they add at induction sessions or courses for trainees. As well as helping with free legal aid for accident and injury victims and for people suffering from industrial diseases, union safety reps help keep the workplace safe. Workers value the union role in health and safety and it makes a powerful case for union membership and involvement.

Aims

This activity will help you to:

- think about why people should join trade unions
- develop your communication skills.

Task

The course will be split into groups of safety reps, non-members and observers.

- The safety reps will be asked to prepare health and safety arguments to persuade non-members to join.
- The non-members will prepare their questions and arguments.
- The observers will prepare a checklist of points they will watch out for during the interview.

You will then be divided into groups of three – safety rep, non-member and observer – and the safety rep will explain the advantages of being in the union to convince the non-member to join. Observers should note down the main points and be prepared to report back to the rest of the course.

Aims

This activity will help you to:

- locate your members, non-members and safety reps
- work out where you need new safety reps
- start to identify recruitment targets.

Activity

Using flipcharts, draw a map or chart of the different parts of the workplace you represent. Include different sites, rooms, those working from home or off site. Then using a colour code, identify:

- numbers of members and non-members (remember to record where another union is recognised)
- number of health and safety reps
- membership interest in health and safety ('active interest', 'some interest', 'no interest')
- areas where the union has been involved in a health and safety issue over the last year
- any other particular areas of concern.

Agree what further information you need and how you will go about finding it. Give some consideration to how you can keep your map up to date.

Be prepared to explain your findings to the course.

Aims

This activity will help you to:

- improve health and safety at work
- think through how the union branch/workplace structure organises for health and safety
- examine how safety reps are organised.

Task

Read through the Organisation of Safety Reps checklist on the next page. In groups, answer the questions as they apply to your workplace branch.

Then consider all the “no” answers and discuss how to make the improvements that would turn them into “yes”.

Make sure you consider equality issues, for example gender or disability, where timing or access to information may be an issue.

Be prepared to report back to the course.

Safety reps at work – CHECKLIST

- 1 Does every safety rep know which part of the workplace they represent? **Yes** **No**
- 2 Have all safety reps been trained? **Yes** **No**
- 3 Are employers notified of new safety rep appointments? **Yes** **No**
- 4 Do safety reps get the information and support they need? **Yes** **No**
- 5 Is there a regular report provided to the union branch by safety reps? **Yes** **No**
- 6 Are safety reps consulted on negotiating issues like restructuring? **Yes** **No**
- 7 Do safety reps get enough time to carry out their duties? **Yes** **No**
- 8 Are there any gaps in safety rep coverage? **Yes** **No**

Aims

This activity will help you to:

- check that health and safety issues get taken up efficiently
- make sure that problems are shared.

Task

In groups, discuss the following problem.

A member telephones the union rep to say that she has been off work with stress. Several others in her department have been off work, which has added to the pressure.

Should the problem be referred to:

- the health and safety rep?
- the shop steward?
- the full time officer?
- the employer?

Make a note of your conclusions and be prepared to report back to the course.

Aims

This activity will help you to:

- identify the obstacles to recruiting safety reps
- overcome these obstacles
- plan ways of supporting safety reps.

Task

Discuss and identify what you think prevents workers from volunteering or standing for election as safety reps. Make a list on a flipchart and then discuss ways of overcoming the obstacles and supporting new safety reps.

Report back to the rest of the course.



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