



Risks Newsletter



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Editor: [Rory O'Neill](#) of [Hazards](#) magazine. Comments to the TUC at healthandsafety@tuc.org.uk

Risks is the TUC's weekly online bulletin for safety reps and others, read each week by over 14,000 subscribers and 1,500 on the TUC website. To receive this bulletin every week, click [here](#). Past issues are [available](#). This edition contains [Useful links](#) [TUC courses for safety reps](#) [Disclaimer](#) and [Privacy statement](#).

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UNION NEWS

Kids and workers need keyboard skills

The TUC is calling on the government to help stop the epidemic of workplace repetitive strain injuries (RSI) by introducing typing and keyboard skills into schools. It says in 2004/05 nearly 375,000 people suffered from a musculoskeletal disorder affecting the upper limbs or neck that was caused or made worse by their current or past work. RSI is easily preventable if employers undertake a risk assessment and provide proper ergonomic equipment and working methods for staff, however most employers are not doing this, says the TUC. One of the causes of RSI is the large number of “two-fingered typists” who use computers for a considerable part of the working day without any proper keyboard training. TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said: “Keyboard skills are not a statutory part of the National Curriculum, although individual schools can decide to introduce them. This means that millions of children are missing out on a life skill that could help protect the workforce of tomorrow from this painful and chronic illness. The government should introduce touch typing and keyboard skills into the National Curriculum as soon as possible.” TUC says workers should ensure their workstation is set up properly.

- [TUC news release](#), [Hazards computer workstation checklists](#), [Office ergonomics pocket guide](#) from Canadian safety organisation CCOHS.

Most strain injuries made on the shopfloor

Factory workers rather than managers are most at risk from repetitive strain injury (RSI), the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) has warned. It says the problem is widespread, with 86,000 new work-related cases recorded last year. An analysis of official Health and Safety Executive figures shows ‘metal, plastics, textile and other plant and machine workers’ top the

RSI rates league table, followed by ‘bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters and others in skilled trades’. The jobs with lowest rates were professionals and managers, with an incidence just one-third that of the high risk trades. CSP chair Sarah Bazin said all employers should use occupational health physiotherapists. “Physios can advise on appropriate equipment and safe working practices for staff. Taking regular, short breaks throughout the day and reporting symptoms early on can help.” She added: “Employers who invest in the health of their workforce can expect to see a reduction in sickness absence and a more productive workforce.” CSP has published a list of “top tips” for workers on how to avoid RSI. It says it wants to see employers: Provide assessments for each staff member to see what risks are associated with their job and how best to combat them; encourage early reporting of any symptoms and provide access to appropriate help, such as consulting an occupational physiotherapist; and to ensure employees are able to organise their work and take regular breaks. Canadian union federation CLC called this week for workplace ergonomic regulations to prevent strain injuries. Similar measures to tackle workplace strains were part of the European Union’s plan of work for 2002-2006, but were blocked by employers’ organisations ([Risks 295](#)).

- [CSP news release](#) and RSI ‘top tips on RSI prevention’ factsheet [[pdf](#)]. [CLC news release](#), [RSI Action](#).

Workplace danger as English lessons face cut

Government plans that would restrict access to free English language classes would lead to some migrant workers facing an increased risk of accidents at work, lecturers’ union UCU has warned. Roger Kline, UCU head of employment rights, has urged ministers to bear in mind the health and safety impact of cuts to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision for migrant workers, taking account of recent tragedies. He said Health and Safety

Executive (HSE) research already showed migrant workers faced a heightened workplace accident risk ([Risks 279](#)). “Compounding the dangers already facing migrant workers by restricting access to English language courses seems perverse,” he said. “Ministers are well aware of the tragic circumstances in which the Morecambe Bay cockle pickers died, unable to make 999 mobile phone calls due to lack of English. And in Manchester recently, a bus company had its operating licence withdrawn after the investigation into an accident related death revealed that many of the company's migrant drivers had little or no English and had not been trained to understand road signs and basic instructions.” Pointing to official guidance on the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, he added: “National guidance to employers on health and safety says they should ‘take account of workers’ capabilities and their level of training, knowledge and experience’ and this is particularly important for migrant workers. The government says it will cut free English courses because employers should be providing training - but it knows that most employers don't provide English training, yet it is doing nothing about that.” He added: “Restricting access to ESOL could increase injuries and threaten lives.”

- [UCU news release. UCU Save ESOL campaign. Save ESOL Early Day Motion](#) – check to see if your MP has signed.
- [TUC migrant workers webpage and resources. Hazards migrants webpages.](#)

Time to stop agency worker abuse

Loopholes in employment law that leave agency staff open to exploitation must be closed to stop employers using them as a source of cheap, vulnerable labour, says a new TUC report. ‘Agency workers - Counting the cost of flexibility’ was released this week ahead of a 2 March debate on the Temporary Agency Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Bill ([Risks 292](#)). It seeks to give

agency workers the same rights as full-time and directly employed staff on key issues including basic wages and sick and holiday pay. TUC research findings published in the report shows almost half of agency staff would rather have a permanent job and a quarter are in assignments of more than a year, so are not just filling a temporary need. It adds that agency work only accounts for one per cent of the workforce, so the economic impact of toughening up protection for agency staff would be negligible. The report includes examples of agencies breaking employment law, particularly when placing vulnerable workers such as migrants. These include forcing workers to live in overcrowded, substandard accommodation, making illegal deductions from the minimum wage and charging for required health and safety equipment. TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said: “Poor job rights for agency staff allow unscrupulous employers to exploit agency workers, who are paid less, given fewer holidays and lose out on sick pay and pensions.” He added: “New rights won't end agency working, they will simply mean that agencies do what they are meant to do, help employers overcome temporary staffing problems.” He said the proposed bill, which is strongly supported by unions, would “help close the gap that denies an important part of the workforce basic decent minimum rights at work.” A study last year found that men in temporary jobs are more likely to suffer health problems than men in secure employment ([Risks 288](#)). Precarious work has been linked to host of workplace injury and ill-health risks ([Risks 260](#)). Temporary agency worker Rory Littley, 22, was killed last week at a Plymouth City Council depot. He died from abdominal and pelvic injuries after being crushed between a forklift truck and a heavy goods vehicle.

- [TUC news release](#) and report, Agency workers: Counting the cost of flexibility [[pdf](#)]. [Amicus news release. TGWU news release. Personnel Today. Plymouth Herald.](#)

Post union wins “walk safe” measures

A two-year campaign by Royal Mail union CWU has won a new “Walk Safe” anti-violence policy to protect mail delivery staff. CWU national safety officer Dave Joyce said the union’s campaign was prompted by increasing numbers of assaults. “Physical attacks are obviously dangerous for workers as violence can cause physical harm and injury, pain, distress, disability or even death. Serious or persistent verbal abuse can also be a significant problem too, as it can cause damage to our people’s health through stress, anxiety, fear and depression.” He said the new procedure “provides a firm basis for controlling the problem and offering better protection for our members. It is important now for local managers to work with CWU health and safety representatives to deploy the policy and the newly designed threat risk assessment in order to maintain arrangements and co-operation in promoting and developing local measures to ensure the safety and well-being of Royal Mail delivery staff.” He added: “We will also see closer liaison with police forces across the UK who have welcomed the new package of measures.” Under the new policy, Royal Mail security officers will monitor and assess risk factors, including locations and type of mail being delivered, while unit managers will have to ensure walk risk assessments are carried out, with potential threats identified in consultation with union safety reps.

- [CWU news release](#).

Employers must act on asbestos risks

The TUC is calling on employers to protect workers from mesothelioma, an asbestos-related disease that kills over 2,000 people every year. It says although the supply and use of asbestos has now been banned in the UK, it is still found in an estimated 1.5 million workplaces, with many employers unaware of its presence. As a result, maintenance and other workers can be exposed if they work in areas where asbestos is present, often ripping out or drilling into material

containing asbestos and breathing in the potentially fatal fibres. TUC says the risks can be prevented if employers obey regulations which took effect in November 2006 and find out if there is asbestos on their premises. TUC general secretary Brendan Barber, speaking ahead of Action Mesothelioma Day on 27 February, said: “No worker's life should be put at risk by employers who just cannot be bothered to get a simple survey done. We urge all safety representatives to make sure that their workplace has been checked, and that proper control measures are in place, including providing information and training to both staff and any contractors on asbestos.” TUC says any asbestos discovered in surveys should be clearly marked to prevent anyone working on or near the dangerous material. Damaged asbestos material should always be removed, it adds. It warns that there are too few safety inspectors in the UK to make sure that every employer has checked for asbestos. This means that maintenance, building and demolition workers are being put at unnecessary risk. Thousands of workers, asbestos disease sufferers, family members, bereaved relatives and trade union and health and safety campaigners attended 27 February Action Mesothelioma Day events nationwide. A YouTube film clip prepared for the day and featuring people with mesothelioma and bereaved relatives had had over 1,000 viewings by 1 March.

- [TUC news release](#). TUC/HSE asbestos regulations guide for safety representatives [[pdf](#)]. [Hazards magazine ‘Stop! Asbestos!’ short guide](#) and [asbestos webpages](#).
- [Action Mesothelioma short film](#). [Action Mesothelioma podcast](#) featuring Tony Robinson. [Action Mesothelioma website](#).

Union secures shipyard asbestos compensation

Amicus has secured compensation for the family of a former shipyard worker on Tyneside who died from mesothelioma. Stephen Addison worked on a number of shipyards on the River

Tyne from 1939 until the 1960s where he was exposed to asbestos. He died in May 2005, aged 89, after being diagnosed with mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lung caused by exposure to asbestos, earlier that year. His son, also Stephen, will receive a five-figure sum on behalf of the family after they pursued compensation through Amicus' free legal help scheme. He said: "My dad worked in every yard on the river as did many shipyard workers at the time. He would return home from work covered in asbestos dust and at the time he did not realise it would lead to ill health in the future." He added: "Over the years he had seen many of his friends die from mesothelioma. As a family we felt it was only right to claim compensation. He was made to work in those appalling conditions and we felt there should be justice for his death." Amicus regional secretary Davey Hall said: "Many of our union members in the North East have suffered from asbestos-related illnesses and we work hard to ensure their employers take responsibility."

- [Thompson's Solicitors news release.](#)

OTHER NEWS

Government acts on mesothelioma care

The government has launched a new framework for improving the care of people with the asbestos cancer mesothelioma. On Action Mesothelioma Day, 27 February, health minister Rosie Winterton announced the new framework, providing advice to the NHS on how to organise services for mesothelioma patients in order to improve quality of care. The government says "it is hoped that the NHS will adopt the recommendations set out in the Framework to ensure better care for mesothelioma patients and their families." Rosie Winterton said: "Mesothelioma can be a challenging condition for the NHS to diagnose and manage, especially as the number of cases varies around the country so that, in some areas, it is a rare condition." She added: "It is important that we work to improve

quality of care to a uniformly high level across the country. With a potential peak of cases less than ten years away, we have a window of opportunity now to ensure that the NHS has done all it can to provide a high quality service for all mesothelioma patients." Chris Knighton of the Mick Knighton Mesothelioma Research Fund – her husband Mick died of the disease - said: "Action Mesothelioma Day gives a much needed opportunity to promote a greater awareness into the dangers of asbestos - past, present and future. The UK faces an epidemic of mesothelioma, yet awareness of the hazard of asbestos is still dangerously low. Mesothelioma is a cruel disease with, as yet, no cure and it is vital that people understand that they still have to be vigilant about asbestos. Anyone who comes into contact with it could be at risk."

- [DH news release. National Mesothelioma Framework.](#) [BLF news release.](#) [Action Mesothelioma website.](#)

Companies fined for asbestos crimes

Two Lancashire companies have been fined a total of £25,000 and ordered to pay total costs of £11,788 after pleading guilty at Blackpool Magistrates Court to criminal charges brought by the HSE after employees were exposed to asbestos during refurbishment work. After pleading guilty to safety charges, In The Pink Leisure Ltd was fined £10,000 and ordered to pay £4,753 costs and contractor Eclipse Developments Ltd was fined £15,000 and ordered to pay £6,535 costs. The cases arose from an HSE visit - made in April 2005 following a complaint - to the site of a new night club operated by In The Pink Leisure Ltd. HSE lead construction inspector for Lancashire Mark Cottrill said "a substantial amount of asbestos insulating board and flock asbestos was disturbed while the refurbishment was being carried out." As a result the site was shut while a licensed asbestos contractor carried out an environmental clean and the removal of the remaining asbestos. "Both companies had had previous advice in relation to asbestos on the site

following a visit from HSE in January 2002, when a full survey was carried out and an amount of asbestos removed,” said the HSE inspector, adding that no-one had referred back to the existing survey which identified asbestos on the premises. “The prosecution was taken because of this failure and the consequent exposure of up to a dozen employees working in the construction being exposed to asbestos containing materials,” he said.

- [HSE news release](#) and [asbestos webpages](#).

Most reportable work accidents not reported

New research for the Health and Safety Executive suggests most legally reportable workplace accidents, including major injuries, are not being reported. Researchers from the University of Liverpool interviewed 581 patients at the Royal Liverpool University Hospital who had suffered reportable work-related injuries and found only 30 per cent of reportable accidents to employees were in fact reported. The situation was worse still for self-employed workers, where only 2 of the 15 reportable injuries (13 per cent) were reported. HSE had previously thought reporting rates were higher, at about the 50 per cent mark. Under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR), employers, the self-employed and anyone in control of work premises should report deaths, major injuries or any other injury leading to three days or more away from work. The researchers found however: “The main reason accidents were reported was time lost from work; other reasons for reporting accidents (major injuries, 4 or more days on reduced duties) were largely ignored.” In the light of the findings, retail union Usdaw has advised its union reps to: Ensure that accidents are both properly reported and notified by members; investigate workplace accidents; and receive and retain information relating to workplace accidents.

- [An investigation of reporting of workplace](#)

[accidents under RIDDOR using the Merseyside Accident Information Model](#), HSE Research Report RR528, 2007 [[pdf](#)].

- [Usdaw news release](#). Hazards [compensation](#) and [work and health](#) webpages.

What do you mean, ‘good work’?

After several months extolling the health giving properties of “good work” ([Risks 274](#), [Risks 281](#)), the government is now asking what “good work” exactly means. This week new DWP minister Lord McKenzie posed the question to businesses, government and charities. At a seminar hosted by the Work Foundation, the first of four on the good work theme, the minister said: “We know that good work is beneficial for individuals, communities, and the economy. But we need to figure out exactly what ‘good work’ is, so that we can ensure workplaces are happy, healthy and productive. This may necessitate a radical rethink, including addressing outdated work practices, increasing flexible working, cutting red tape, and promoting effective and open work cultures.” He added: “Positive changes will reduce the number of days lost to ill health and injury, and allow people to remain in and return to work quicker. A collective effort is essential to achieve this - government must work alongside businesses, charities and healthcare professionals.” Professor Andy Watterson, head of Stirling University’s Occupational and Environmental Health Research Group, was critical, however, saying the government was “missing the gorilla in the living room”. He told Risks: “The two factors most clearly associated with ‘good work’ are missing from the strategy. The first is control over the job, and this means workers having real influence over how the job is designed, from content, to work pace, to work organisation, to the working environment. The second is proper health and safety standards, properly enforced. The government is asking business, charities and health professional but not workers what they think, so is failing on the first count. And health and safety inspections, prosecutions and the

number of safety inspectors are all plummeting, so it is failing on the second count too.”

- [DWP news release](#). [Personnel Today](#). [Health Work and Well-being strategy](#). [What's wrong with the strategy – from Hazards magazine](#). [Hazards work and health webpages](#).

Network Rail admits failures led to train smash

Network Rail admitted this week that maintenance failures caused the 23 February Cumbria rail crash, killing Margaret Masson, an 84-year-old passenger, and injuring dozens. Responding to the publication of an interim investigation, the company said it was “devastated” and apologised unreservedly “to all the people affected by the failure of the infrastructure.” A report by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) concluded that one of three stretcher bars, which keep the rails properly apart at a points intersection, was missing and two others were fractured. It said bolts used to secure the lock bar and another stretcher bar were not in place. Some missing nuts and washers were found nearby; others were not. John Armitt, the Network Rail chief executive, whose organisation took over responsibility for track maintenance in 2002, said: “Network Rail is devastated to conclude that the condition of the set of points at Grayrigg caused this terrible accident. We accept the RAIB report in all respects. We would like to apologise to all the people affected by the failure of the infrastructure. We now need to understand how the points came to be in this condition and we will leave no stone unturned in our search for the facts behind this derailment.” Trade unions have called for an independent inquiry into the accident. RMT general secretary Bob Crow wrote to the transport secretary, Douglas Alexander, saying: “It is our contention that the public inquiry, in addition to establishing the facts of the accident, should also examine the adequacy of Network Rail's management systems because of the fragmentation of engineering work that still afflicts our railways.” He added: “I am extremely concerned that there

are still contractors, subcontractors, labour-only agencies and one-man-and-a-trolley outfits let loose on the tracks under Network Rail and this should form part of the remit for the public inquiry.” Gerry Doherty, general secretary of rail union TSSA, said there should be no repeated of the “behind closed doors” inquiry which followed the Potters Bar rail crash five years ago, adding “there are key questions that need to be asked about the safety of the track and we want those to be fully explored at a public inquiry.” Keith Norman, general secretary of the train drivers’ union ASLEF, whose member Iain Black, 46, has been hailed a ‘reluctant hero’ for staying at the controls of the train during the crash, suffering broken bones and other injuries, said: “We are a family of drivers who work and stick together. This type of incident bonds us all.”

- [Network Rail news release](#). [RMT news release](#). [TSSA news release](#). [ASLEF news release](#) and [additional release on driver Iain Black](#). [The Guardian](#) including [Louise Christian article](#). [Financial Times](#). [BBC News Online](#). [Daily Mail](#).
- [Interim report released into a derailment at Grayrigg, Cumbria, RAIB](#).

Sleeping lorry driver jailed for crash deaths

A lorry driver has been jailed after four people died in a motorway crash caused when he fell asleep at the wheel. German Andreas Klassen, 51, crashed into a queue of slow-moving traffic while travelling at 54mph on the M6 in Staffordshire. The father of three had contravened EU regulations on hauliers' working hours, Stafford Crown Court was told. Klassen, who pleaded guilty to four charges of causing death by dangerous driving, was jailed for five years. Judge Mark Eades also banned Russian-born Klassen from the roads for five years after stating that the only explanation for the crash was that he had fallen asleep. The judge said that Klassen, from Emsdetten, Germany, had flouted regulations on minimum periods of rest in a manner that demonstrated a “deliberate”

decision to ignore them. The regulations required him to have a continuous 11-hour rest during his working day. Defence counsel Edmund Vickers said the consequences of the collision “were clearly not intended.” The international transport unions’ federation and UK transport unions have campaigned for years against the problem of driver fatigue. They say tight schedules and heavy workloads can force drivers into unsafe practices.

- [BBC News Online. ITF road transport webpages. TGWU drivers’ working time campaign.](#)

Job burn-out increased diabetes risk

People who suffer from job burn-out may be prone to developing type 2 diabetes, research suggests. A study of 677 mostly male, middle-aged Israeli workers found those affected by burn-out were nearly twice as likely to develop the condition. When the possible effect of blood pressure levels was eliminated, the risk was more than four-fold higher. The study, published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, suggests stress can be added to other factors known to increase risk. Lead researcher Dr Samule Melamed said: “Emotional burn-out may pose a risk to health. Earlier studies have found it to be associated with cardiovascular disease risk, sleep disturbances, impaired fertility and musculoskeletal pain. Our finding suggests that the potential damage to health may be greater than suspected and it may also include a risk of diabetes.” The Tel Aviv team found people who experienced job burn-out were 1.84 times more likely than others to develop type 2 diabetes, even when factors like age, sex and obesity were taken into account. Natasha Marsland, a care adviser at the charity Diabetes UK, said other studies had also suggested a link between stress and type 2 diabetes. “Working long hours in stressful environments leaves little time for physical activity,” she said. “Unless people find the time to fit in 30 minutes of physical activity a day, the diabetes epidemic will continue to get worse.” It is estimated there are 750,000 people

in the UK who have type 2 diabetes, but do not realise it.

- [BBC News Online.](#)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Canada: Cancer study links site work to head cancers

The risk of developing health and neck cancers is doubled if you work in construction, a new study suggests. Researchers from the University of Stirling’s Occupational and Environmental Health Research Group investigated new cases of head, neck and oesophageal cancers in the Canadian town of Windsor between 2000 and 2002. A total of 87 new cases were identified. They found men who had been diagnosed with head and neck cancer were twice as likely to have worked in construction as participants in a control group. This finding was statistically significant and took account of other known or suspected risk factors. Researcher James Brophy, co-author with Dr Margaret Keith of the research paper, published in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH)*, said: “Some building trade workers have had significant exposures to asbestos, silica and other toxic dusts during the course of their work.” Dr Keith added: “Further research is necessary in order to pinpoint the agents to which workers have been exposed and to determine whether there are specific building trades that face an increased risk for head and neck cancer.” Construction workers are exposed to a wide range of substances known to cause cancer, including asbestos, silica, solvents, diesel exhaust, asphalt fumes and wood dust. Dr Brophy said: “We actually know from other studies that workers - particularly construction workers - are bearing an elevated risk for a whole range of cancers.”

- [Stirling University news release. Sarnia Observer.](#)

- [Hazards work cancer webpages.](#)
- James T Brophy, Margaret M Keith and others. Cancer and construction: What occupational histories in a Canadian community reveal, International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH), volume 13, page 32-38, 2007 [pdf]. http://www.ijoe.com/pfds/IJOEH_1301_Brophy.pdf

Canada: Unions push for shipyard cancer action

Official Canadian health and safety agencies in Newfoundland and Labrador say they will thoroughly investigate complaints from 15 former shipyard workers who say their workplace gave them cancer. All worked at the Marystown Shipyard and blame exposure to asbestos and toxic chemicals for their cancers. The workers, backed by the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW), have filed formal complaints with the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Commission. “If there are workers who have gotten cancer because of where they worked and because of the work they did in the shipyard, somebody should take care of that,” said Reg Anstey, president of the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour. “There should be compensation.” The workers say workplace exposures led to the lung, stomach and bowel cancers. “The whole question of industrial disease is the biggest single issue facing workers' compensation boards all across the country, and the big unions have been the primary movers and shakers of trying to get recognition on these issues,” Reg Anstey said.

- [CAW news release.](#) [CBC News.](#) [CAW prevent cancer campaign.](#)

Europe: Health and safety strategy “poorest” yet

The European Union’s new health and safety action programme is the “poorest strategy” in three decades, Europe’s top trade union body has said. An ETUC statement said that while the new five-year strategy adopted last month boasts apparently ambitious targets ([Risks 295](#)), “it is the poorest strategy in terms of concrete initiatives proposed since the first Community action programme adopted in 1978.” ETUC is particularly concerned at that the strategy’s primary focus is on accident prevention. “The ETUC regrets that diseases linked to work are not considered in the Commission communication. The text mentions only ‘occupational illnesses’.” This makes a big difference as the definition of occupational illnesses used by Europe’s policy makers “account for no more than a very small fraction of all the illnesses linked to work. Less than 5 per cent of the cases of cancer caused by work in Europe are recognised as occupational illnesses.” The ETUC statement says: “The ETUC’s view is that a prevention strategy is based upon some precise mechanisms which make it possible to drive concrete actions in the workplace. The three essential mechanisms in any prevention system are: worker representation; the factory inspectorate; and prevention services.” The European trade union body adds: “If we want to drive down work-related illnesses, the ETUC considers that two areas would need to be viewed as central priorities: the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and the battle against chemical risks, and in particular, cancers linked to work.” It says both were in the previous strategy, but no progress was made on either issue. Now there is just a “vague” comment that the European Commission will look at “possible initiatives” on these areas, it says. “After five years of procrastination, the ETUC would have liked the Commission to have come up with a more precise idea of the ‘possible initiatives’!” the ETUC statement says.

- [ETUC news release.](#) [Business Insurance.](#)

South Africa: Sick manganese workers demand action

Scores of factory workers - many shuffling about on walking sticks - gathered last week to urge South Africa's labour department to get to the bottom of a manganese poison scandal. Their attorney, Richard Spoor, said it was unacceptable that more than 30 suspected cases of poisoning from manganese dust and fumes had been detected so far in workers exposed at the Assmang smelter in Cato Ridge. He added there were strong indications that many more people had been "simply discarded" by the company because of a breakdown of occupational health and safety standards at the factory. Last week's meeting was called by senior inspectors of the labour department at the request of Spoor and shop stewards from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa). Sources who attended the meeting said labour officials were aware of at least 35 cases of Assmang workers now under surveillance for manganese poisoning, and had urged affected people to come forward to give evidence and make formal statements. Spoor said afterwards that he was heartened to see so many workers coming together. "Now they can see that there are many others like them who are also sick and in pain, and who can stand together. It is not acceptable that a company can make people sick and not be held responsible - and we are hoping that we will be able to persuade Assmang to do the right thing." Several of the workers also asked for medical advice about the manganese levels found in their blood, and whether they were being protected adequately following a prohibition notice that was served on the company last year for exceeding manganese safety guidelines. Blood tests revealed some workers had manganese levels almost 13 times the "acceptable" level. Spoor said that instead of focusing unduly on blood results, workers should look out for early symptoms of manganese poisoning - including shaky hands, slurred speech, headaches, stiffness, fatigue, impotence, difficulties in breathing or swallowing as well as a fixed gaze or "dead-looking face". He also referred to a list of nearly 20 former Assmang employees who had allegedly died in unexplained circumstances, and noted that Assmang was only prepared to

confirm four "confirmed" cases of people suffering from manganism.

- [The Mercury](#).

ACTION

HSE seeks better backs campaign feedback

The Health and Safety Executive wants feedback from union safety reps on their "experience and involvement in the HSE's Better Backs campaign in October/November 2006, which dealt with back pain as a result of manual handling." It says this feedback will help the Better Backs team make improvements in its next campaign in 2007/08. It is asking safety reps to complete an online questionnaire by 12 March 2007.

- HSE Better Backs Campaign – [safety rep feedback questionnaire](#).

Support the letterbox campaign!

Postal union CWU is backing an e-petition calling for safer letterboxes. The union says it has 65,000 members carrying out deliveries on a daily basis who are often confronted with letterboxes virtually at ground level. It says the constant bending is a back injury risk. The e-petition to the prime minister calls for a law "requiring all letter boxes to be: Located at a clear height; easy to post through; designed to allow leaflets to be posted without destroying them; designed to protect people's hands when posting; dog proof." CWU is urging people to support the campaign by signing the online petition.

- [CWU news release](#). [Safer letterboxes petition](#).

Can you fill a big hole in the East Midlands?

A union safety veteran is hanging up his flip chart for the last time. Jake Jackson, who has been a part of the small band of union health and safety officials since the mid-1980s, is retiring. Jake was one of the GMB head office safety team that helped make safety a national priority in the 1980s, with union campaigns on asbestos and other safety concerns emerging as regular talking points in the national press and in the House of Commons. He also witnessed the emergence of tens of thousands of union-trained workplace safety reps, the single most important safety development of the late 20th century. Jake later moved from the union's London HQ to become the GMB regional education and health and safety officer at its Nottingham-based Midland and East Coast Region office. GMB is now seeking someone with a background in trade union education or health and safety to fill his shoes. It could be you – if you put in an application in the next two weeks.

- Further details of the [GMB regional education and health and safety officer vacancy](#). Closing date 16 March 2007.

EVENTS AND COURSES

TUC courses for safety reps

COURSES FOR JANUARY TO MARCH 2007

- [Northern](#), [Southern & Eastern](#), [Yorkshire & Humber](#), [South West](#), [Midlands](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#)