



Risks Newsletter



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Risks is the TUC's weekly online bulletin for safety reps and others, read each week by over 15,000 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](#).

In this issue

• UNION NEWS

- Unite secures pay for victimised TNT rep
- Bus drivers strike for safety
- Cutbacks threat to fire safety
- Cut weight limit, say bag handlers
- Rise in Scottish teacher compo payouts
- More vibration, more payouts
- Tribute to 171 fallen journalists

• OTHER NEWS

- Half the workforce faces monitoring stress
- Overworked probation officer 'forced out'
- Network Rail warned for inspection failings

- Five years to deafen a worker
- Director gets community service
- Construction giant fined after crane incident
- Firm fined for scaffold subbie's serious injuries
- Steel giant is fined £3,000 for toe loss
- Farm women's asthma risk from pesticides
- **INTERNATIONAL NEWS**
- Australia: Action call on shiftwork cancer risk
- China: Exports come at a high price
- Europe: Euro MPs call for work disease action
- South Korea: Warehouse inferno kills 40
- USA: Deadly lung risk to kitchen staff
- **EVENTS AND COURSES**
- TUC courses for safety reps
- **USEFUL LINKS**

UNION NEWS

Unite secures pay for victimised TNT rep

Giant courier company TNT has been forced to continue paying a Unite member who was victimised for his union activity and fired after being injured at work. The company sacked Dave Reeves soon after he was elected as a shop steward at its Bristol depot. A Bristol employment tribunal has now ordered a continuation of contract for Dave Reeves, who was dismissed just before Christmas by TNT following attempts by his managers to stop him becoming a shop steward. Announcing the order, employment judge Mrs OR Harper said there was a good chance that Dave Reeves was dismissed because of his union activity and his proposed shop steward position. Unite regional industrial organiser Pam Jennings said: “First, local management decided that they would not allow him to be a shop steward because they weren't happy with how he had been selected. So, we arranged a fresh system of nomination and election. But that wasn't acceptable to the company either. Despite misgivings, I agreed to hold a further election. Then, surprise, surprise: TNT sacked Dave Reeves before Christmas, claiming that an accident in which he sustained shoulder and back injuries, and for which he had not claimed any compensation, was a fake.” She added: “TNT management could give lessons in oppression to the worst Victorian mill owners. But the interim relief order made by the employment tribunal must be a signal to the company that it is time that its industrial relations team joined the 21st century.”

- [Unite news release](#). [Thompsons Solicitors news release](#).

Bus drivers strike for safety

The second of four scheduled one-day safety strikes by more than 375 bus drivers at a south-west England bus firm took place on 8 January. RMT members at the Wiltshire and Dorset bus company are taking action as a result of a long-running dispute over excessive driving time, lack of breaks and imposed rosters. The workers at Blandford, Bournemouth, Lymington, Poole, Ringwood and Swanage depots are also

scheduled to walk out on 16 and 21 January. The action should show “how determined they are to return to sensible, safe, negotiated rosters with adequate built-in breaks,” RMT general secretary Bob Crow said ahead of the 8 January 24-hour walkout. “From the response our members have had on picket lines it is also clear that there is substantial public support for the stand they are making to protect the safety of bus workers and their passengers. This dispute is a straightforward one caused by the imposition of rosters that demand excessive driving time, and that is why our members have twice voted by more than 10 to 1 to take action.” The union said the company, part of the national Go-Ahead group, was putting profits ahead of driver and passenger safety. It added Go-Ahead made more than £55 million in profits from its bus operations last year.

- [RMT news release](#). [BBC News Online](#).

Cutbacks threat to fire safety

Fire service cuts are putting firefighters and the public at risk, fire service union FBU has warned. The union has highlighted planned cutbacks in Cleveland and in Humberside. FBU says cuts in government cash to Cleveland for the next three years “take no account of the Authority’s unique, high risk operating environment and will result in the loss of about 60 firefighter posts.” FBU says the area has 37 of the highest level major accident hazard (COMAH) industrial sites and the highest concentration of petrochemical sites in Western Europe. Steve Watson, Cleveland FBU brigade secretary, said: “Cleveland is not just unique in the UK, but in Europe because of the huge number of the very highest level of major accident hazard sites. We have sites many, many times the size of Buncefield.” He added: “Cleveland fire crews have legitimate concerns and strong views about public safety and their own safety. We are particularly aware of these issues at a time when, nationally, firefighter deaths have reached a 30-year high.” In Humberside, the Fire and Rescue Authority intends to make budget cuts of £4

million over the next three years. FBU says this is despite the authority getting far more money than it expected from central government. Local fire crews estimate the planned cuts will see the loss of 1 in 10 frontline firefighter posts, amounting to 100 to 110 jobs. Ian Murray, Humberside FBU spokesperson, said: “With those closures and cuts that back up will take longer to arrive which will affect our ability to do our jobs at emergency incidents. This will clearly compromise public safety and our safety. Firefighters could be left in the impossible position at 999 incidents of either waiting until a safe number of firefighters arrive and risking the lives of the public, or ignoring basic safety procedures and risking our own lives.”

- FBU news releases on the [Cleveland](#) and [Humberside](#) cutbacks.

Cut weight limit, say bag handlers

Baggage handlers nationwide are campaigning for the maximum luggage weight limit allocated to each airline passenger to be cut. Unite, the workers' union, says baggage handlers want the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to reduce the maximum weight limit from 32kg to 23kg a bag. It says the number of accidents nationally caused by workers shifting heavy bags has increased in the last year by 17 per cent. Brendan Gold, Unite civil aviation spokesperson, said: “Unite is determined to reduce the number of accidents among our members who have to shift heavy bags at ever faster rates. That means reducing the weight of individual items to 23kg. We want MPs and the airlines to put pressure on the Health and Safety Executive” ([Risks 325](#)). MP Paul Goggins has promised to lobby HSE. Mr Goggins, MP for Wythenshawe and Sale East, was given a tour of baggage handling areas at Manchester Airport when he went to meet union officials. He said: “The time has come to make a change. I will be urging the Health and Safety Executive to reduce the maximum weight of passenger baggage to 23kg.” Baggage handling companies have been prosecuted recently for

failing to introduce adequate manual handling aids, including baggage conveyors ([Risks 322](#)).

- [Manchester Evening News](#).

Rise in Scottish teacher compo payouts

Scotland's schools and colleges spent more than £250,000 on compensation payments to teachers last year, union figures have revealed. Claims ranged from £38,000 for distress caused by a wrongful prosecution based on false allegations to £750 for a teacher who slipped on a stairwell. The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) report shows that a total of £180,300 was paid to union members. A further £70,000 was spent on legal fees. Ronnie Smith, EIS general secretary, said many of the claims could have been avoided if employers took health and safety more seriously. He said: “The number of incidents remains far too high and the amount of compensation paid out is actually up slightly on last year. This shows that more still needs to be done in our schools, colleges and universities to ensure the safety and well-being of teaching staff.” The union leader said: “All employers, including schools and colleges, must take the health and safety of their employees seriously.” Mr Smith added: “Quite apart from the cost to educational establishments – and thus the taxpayer – in legal fees and in settling claims for compensation, we must also consider the hidden costs in these cases. These would include personal costs to the individual concerned through their pain and suffering, as well as the effects on their personal and home life.” Many of the payouts were due to assaults, including a teacher left with a broken cheekbone and nose after a punch to the face who was awarded £2,300, while another received £1,750 for a kick to the groin. A physical education teacher who lost their voice due to “environmental/acoustic” conditions was awarded £8,000.

- [EIS news release](#). [BBC News Online](#).

More vibration, more payouts

A boilermaker from Port Talbot whose hands have been permanently damaged from regular use of vibrating tools has been paid compensation from four employers with the support of his trade union GMB. The man, aged 50, whose name has not been released, has been employed by four different companies during his working life and has been regularly exposed to excessive vibration from tools such as grinders, pistol drills, large drills, needle guns and impact wrenches. His current employer - Fairwood Fabrications - admitted breach of duty after court proceedings were issued, but the other three defendants – West End Forge Ltd (formerly Express Site Services Ltd) of Swansea, A. WELD Ltd of Neath, and BP Oil Refinery Ltd of Llandarcy, denied liability throughout and did not agree to pay compensation until a few days before the trial was due to take place. As a result of the settlement, the man has been paid a total of £8,400 compensation. Since then, his job with his current employer has changed so he is no longer exposed to hazardous levels of vibration. GMB legal officer Nick Hughes commented: “We are very pleased with the settlement our member has secured from these employers. He should have been provided with padded gloves designed to reduce the amount of vibration received when using these tools. We hope that it will now force these four firms to ensure that correct health and safety procedures are in place in the future.” Workers exposed to vibration continue to suffer nerve, blood supply and strain injuries as a result, with the long recognised conditions affecting young as well as older workers ([Risks 336](#)).

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release](#).

Tribute to 171 fallen journalists

Union leaders have paid tribute to the 171 journalists killed worldwide in 2007 while doing their jobs. The figure includes 65 journalists

killed in Iraq, which remains the most dangerous country for the media. The 2007 toll is the second highest figure on record behind 2006, when 177 died doing their job. The dead list, published by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), covers all journalists killed because of their work, including targeted murders, and deaths whilst covering violent events. They also cover journalists involved in accidents whilst working on a story, although these cases account for only around one-fifth of cases. Conflict zones account for many of the deaths. Action to suppress of free speech or investigation of crimes has also resulted in journalists being murdered. Throughout Latin America journalists are believed to have been killed for their reporting on gangs, drugs and politicians. Michelle Stanistreet, president of UK journalists’ union NUJ, said: “On average a journalist is killed every other day, yet despite the threats they continue to work under unstable and hazardous conditions. That people are willing to risk their lives to report the news demonstrates a commendable commitment to the basic tenets of journalism.” She added: “It is particularly shocking that in some cases killers are literally getting away with murder. All these cases of targeted killings should be fully investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.” IFJ president Jim Boumelha said: “Violence against journalists remains at extremely high levels for the third year in a row. The scale of attacks on journalists marks a continuing crisis filled with unlimited human tragedy and relentless attacks on press freedom.” IFJ general secretary Aidan White said: “Many killers of journalists are just getting away with murder. Governments must take these issues seriously. Every case must be investigated. Those responsible must be punished.”

- [IFJ news release](#) and full list of the journalists and media workers killed in 2007 ([Excel file](#)). [NUJ news release](#). [INSI news release](#) and [casualties lists](#). [BBC News Online](#).

OTHER NEWS

Millions of workers face monitoring stress

Millions of UK employers are reporting exhaustion, work-related anxiety and a deteriorating family life, according to extensive surveys of both employers and employees funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The researchers say rising work strain is being caused by the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to monitor and check work continuously. “ICT surveillance can seriously damage employees' well-being,” said Michael White of Policy Studies Institute, one of the authors of the research. Over half (52 per cent) of all British employees report a computerised system keeps a log or record of their work. Nearly one quarter (23 per cent) say that this information is used to check their performance. “For me that was the most staggering finding,” he said, adding “when you think about it, anyone working at a supermarket checkout, along with order-fillers and shelf-stackers – these all have their work picked up by computer systems. So do people processing paperwork for entry to computer databases, so do lorry and delivery drivers whose work can be tracked by satellite navigation, others involved in distribution, as well as city traders, and people on production lines where progress is computer monitored.” The report concludes the main consequence of ICT surveillance has been a sharp increase in work strain, involving feelings of exhaustion, anxiety and worry related to work. Overall there is a 7.5 per cent increase in work strain for employees whose work is checked by ICT systems, compared with those in similar jobs but controlled by more traditional methods. ICT surveillance increased work strain on administrative and white-collar employees by 10 per cent. For semi-skilled and routine workers concentrated in manufacturing and distribution the increase was eight per cent when under ICT surveillance. A series of reports by Hazards magazine have linked increase surveillance to reduced productivity and increases in stress, RSI and workplace injuries. TUC head of health and safety, Hugh Robertson, commented that many of these surveillance systems were in breach of guidelines from the information commissioner and that surveillance systems should only be

introduced where they were agreed with the union and workers were fully aware of how they worked and what was and was not permitted.

- [PSI news release](#). Better opportunities, greater pressures for Britain’s employees, summary [pdf]. [Financial Times](#). [Hazards magazine workplace surveillance webpages](#).

Overworked probation officer 'forced out'

An overworked probation officer was forced to sell his house and car as he pursued a three-year legal battle to prove he was a victim of discrimination. Now an employment tribunal has ruled that Steven Collingwood, 38, of Carlisle, did suffer disability discrimination and harassment after a nervous breakdown was brought on by overwork in November 2004. During the tribunal, he said he faced enormous stress between April 2004 and January 2005. Managers conceded sickness left the service understaffed in the second half of 2004, as Mr Collingwood’s team shrank from eight to two. His caseload should have been around 80 clients, but by October 2004, it was 150. Matters came to a head in November 2004. Eight offenders all arrived at a day centre to see Mr Collingwood at the same time and the stress triggered his breakdown. The tribunal’s 27-page ruling outlines how the stress wrecked his health. He suffered nightmares, became over emotional, and forgot people’s names. The tribunal ruled he was victimised by his line manager. It also noted the human resources manager refused to undertake a confidential investigation of his bullying claim. Another hearing will determine what compensation Mr Collingwood should receive. A probation spokesperson said managers would appeal against the ruling. ‘Drop dead’, a report from Hazards magazine, linked overwork to heart disease and stroke, mental problems and suicide.

- [New and Star](#). [Worked to death resources](#).

Network Rail warned for inspection failings

Network Rail has been ordered by the railways inspectorate to improve the “inadequate” management of its rail inspection regime. Commenting after Network Rail Infrastructure Limited was served in December with an improvement notice, rail union RMT renewed its call for a safety inquiry to examine the impact of the industry’s continued fragmentation. The company has been ordered to improve its management systems for planning and monitoring track inspection after a report by Her Majesty’s Railways Inspectorate (HMRI) found systematic failings across the network. The report concluded inspection procedures are “not robust”, prompting the legally binding improvement notice. The report, which followed the Grayrigg crash in which one passenger died ([Risks 322](#)), says that “concerns were found across all territories which is indicative of a systematic rather than any local failing”. The improvement notice gives Network Rail until 31 March to devise and implement improvements to track inspection procedures. “This report concludes that experienced and competent rail workers are getting on with the job of finding track faults despite management systems that are letting them down,” RMT general secretary Bob Crow said. “Network Rail’s own investigation into the Grayrigg tragedy and the interim accident report both pointed clearly to management failings and lack of resources, and now we have the inspectorate telling us that the problem is network-wide. We said from the start that Network Rail’s shameful attempts to point the finger at individuals on the ground would serve only to mask the systematic management failings, lack of resources and imposition of unrealistic workloads that are at the heart of the problem.”

- [RMT news release](#). HMRI improvement notice [[pdf](#)].

Five years to deafen a worker

A 40-year-old Lancashire man has been deafened by just five years of periodic exposure to excessive workplace noise. Mark Bulcock received £5,000 in damages after he lost his hearing because of the noisy machines at the sock manufacturer where he worked. He was exposed to a high-pitched noise at the Lancashire Sock Manufacturing Company between 1992 and 1997, whilst heating foam to bind material for ironing board covers. He endured noise measuring up to 106.2 decibels - several times the legal limit - for several minutes as often as 40 times a day. Health and safety regulations at the time said employees should be provided with protective ear wear when exposed to noise over 85 decibels. Lee Carnall from law firm Irwin Mitchell represented Mr Bulcock. He said: “This claim shows that you do not have to be exposed to a constant level of noise to suffer a noise induced hearing loss. Employers should be taking steps to measure the sound levels and ensure that no employee is being exposed to noise above the levels set down by statute.” Lancashire Sock Manufacturing Company agreed to pay damages to Mr Bulcock prior to trial without the firm admitting liability. The workplace noise control law was tightened in April 2006 ([Risks 247](#)).

- [Irwin Mitchell news release](#).

Director gets community service

A company director has been sentenced to 100 hours of work in the community after the death of a construction worker who was crushed by a falling concrete slab. Norman Ellis, of Q Homes (Yorkshire) Ltd, must perform community service and pay £6,000 costs after the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) prosecution. His conviction follows the death of Andrew Bridges, 25, who was killed in 2005 when part of a roof collapsed on him yards from where his father Michael was working. He had been working to demolish a 2.5 tonne reinforced concrete roof of

a former electrical store. Company director Norman Ellis, who was also working on the job, pleaded guilty at Dewsbury Magistrates' Court to failing to ensure the health and safety of an employee. HSE inspector Sarah Hague said the tragedy was "made worse by the fact it could have been prevented had the work been properly planned." She added: "The court was of the opinion that, in this case, a fine would not have reflected the seriousness of the offence. The way in which the work was carried out, which resulted in Mr Bridges' death, represented very serious failings on the part of Mr Ellis who had planned and was also carrying out the work." Magistrates' courts normally restrict their penalties to fines alone and cannot give custodial sentences for safety crimes. However, they may impose a community order where the court is of the opinion that the offence was sufficiently serious. Higher courts can give jail terms for a limited number of safety offences.

- [HSE news release. Building. Telegraph and Argus.](#)

Construction giant fined after crane incident

One of Britain's largest construction firms has been fined for safety offences that cost a worker his foot. Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd (SRM) was fined £40,000 and ordered to pay costs of £12,526 at a sentencing hearing at the Old Bailey on 21 December 2007. SRM had earlier pleaded guilty to criminal breaches of safety law. The prosecution followed a July 2005 incident when an employee on a London construction site was hit by a lamp post which fell on his lower leg after being hit by a mobile crane. The risk had been identified but appropriate action was not taken. HSE inspector Monica Babb said: "Crane operations can present serious risks and it is therefore essential that crane installation is properly planned and implemented. Management systems should be clear so that a safe system of work is employed and incidents such as this are avoided."

- [HSE news release.](#)

Firm fined for scaffold subbie's serious injuries

A housebuilding firm has been fined after a worker employed by a subcontractor was seriously injured in a fall from a scaffold. Construction company Hadden Construction Ltd was fined £2,500 at Stirling Sheriff Court, having pleaded guilty to safety offences. Robert Bone, aged 25, sustained severe injuries when he fell approximately 3.3 metres from the scaffold in January 2007. He was employed by ACUR Joiners Ltd, which was providing joiners to Hadden Construction Ltd on a labour only basis. All materials and working platforms, such as scaffolding, were provided by Hadden. The week before the incident Hadden carried out the statutory weekly inspection on the scaffold and deemed that it was in good order. On the day of the incident, however, two boards were missing from the platform, and Mr Bone stepped backwards into the space. He fell over three metres and suffered severe injuries including broken bones in his back and a fractured breast bone. The HSE investigation revealed Hadden Construction Ltd had failed to ensure scaffolding on this site was maintained in a safe condition and that only competent persons carried out alterations to it. Commenting after the case, HSE inspector Isabelle Martin said: "It is important that those responsible for managing construction sites maintain the scaffolding to ensure that there is a safe working platform at all times. Scaffolding must be regularly inspected - at least weekly - to ensure that it remains in a safe condition. However, it is entirely possible that the scaffolding may need to be inspected at other times as well, such as where alterations are made between those inspections. These alterations must be carried out in a controlled manner by competent individuals who should ensure that guardrails and boarded platforms are complete and the scaffolding is sufficiently safe at all times."

- [HSE news release. HSE construction falls webpage.](#)

Steel giant is fined £3,000 for toe loss

A South Wales steel company has been fined after an incident in which a worker lost four toes. Matthew Walters trapped his foot in a machine used to move steel at the Celsa plant in Cardiff. The Spanish-owned company pleaded guilty at Cardiff Magistrates' Court to failing to prevent access to dangerous parts of the machinery. It was fined £3,000 and ordered to pay £2,000 costs, in a case brought by the Health and Safety Executive. HSE said the company should have taken measures to ensure that the machinery parts were suitably guarded, after an investigation showed there was no safety guard in place. The case is one of four serious incidents at the steel plant in recent months. Celsa was prosecuted after a worker lost a finger and thumb when his hand was trapped and crushed on October 2006. John Penhalagan, 44, was crushed to death in May 2007. And a 41-year-old man died in hospital after a fall at the steelworks in December 2006. He was not supposed to be on shift and the plant was not operating at the time.

- [South Wales Echo](#).

Farm women's asthma risk from pesticides

A study suggests farm women who have contact with some common pesticides are at far greater risk of developing allergic asthma. Researchers at the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) assessed pesticide and other occupational exposures as risk factors for adult-onset asthma in more than 25,000 farm women in North Carolina and Iowa. They found an average increase of 50 per cent in the prevalence of allergic asthma in all farm women who applied or mixed pesticides. Commonly used organophosphate pesticides including malathion were associated with a marked increase in allergic asthma prevalence, according to the study, published in the American Journal

of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine. Permethrin, used in consumer items such as insect-resistant clothing and anti-malaria bed-nets, was associated with both allergic and non-allergic asthma, the report said. "Farm women are an understudied occupational group," said NIEHS's Jane Hoppin, lead author of the study. "More than half the women in our study applied pesticides, but there is very little known about the risks." Although the association with pesticides was higher among women who grew up on farms, these women still had a lower overall risk of having allergic asthma compared to those who did not grow up on farms, due to a protective effect that remains poorly understood. "Growing up on a farm is such a huge protective effect it's pretty hard to overwhelm it," said Dr Hoppin, adding however that "about 40 per cent of women who work on farms don't report spending their childhoods there. It is likely that the association with pesticides is masked in the general population due to a higher baseline rate of asthma." Dr Hoppin has previously reported a higher risk of asthma in pesticides-exposed farmers in general, the results part of the same ongoing Agricultural Health Study ([Risks 324](#)).

- [American Thoracic Society news release](#). [Earth Times](#).
- Jane A Hoppin and others. Pesticides and atopic and nonatopic asthma among farm women in the Agricultural Health Study, *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, volume 177, pages 11-18, 2008 [[abstract](#)]. [Agricultural Health Study](#).

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Australia: Action call on shiftwork cancer risk

One of Australia's biggest unions has called for a review of working hours after an International Agency for Research on Cancer study found people who work night shifts have a higher risk of contracting cancer. The report by the UN agency concluded that night shifts were

“probably” carcinogenic because workers were exposed to light at night, disrupting their circadian rhythms ([Risks 335](#)). The study found that nurses who worked at night and flight attendants who continually crossed time zones had a higher risk of breast cancer than women who did not have their circadian rhythms disrupted, and that constant light, dim light at night, or simulated chronic jet lag could substantially increase tumour development. National secretary of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), Paul Howes, said many of his union's 135,000 members worked 12-hour shifts because it gave them more time with their families, but the risk of cancer had to be taken seriously. “We've been concerned about this for years, and our union has for many years strongly and publicly warned our members that there are calculated risks in 12-hour shifts,” he said. The union's national health and safety officer, Yossi Berger, said the “frightening report” had confirmed the union's worst fears. “We have been telling workers for 15 years that shiftwork can be detrimental to health, and it is no fun to find out, via this study, that we were right,” Dr Berger said. “You can earn a lot more money working these shifts but you may find yourself using the money on a designer oxygen tent. At the end of the day shift work is very, very costly.”

- [AWU news release. Sydney Morning Herald. Courier Mail.](#)
- IARC news release [[pdf](#)]. Kurt Staif and others. Carcinogenicity of shift-work, painting, and fire-fighting. [The Lancet Oncology](#), volume 8, number 12, pages 1065-1066, December 2007. Findings to be published by IARC in Shift-work, painting and fire-fighting, IARC monograph, volume 98, 2008. [Global union zero cancer campaign.](#)

China: Exports come at a high price

Nearly a decade after some of the most powerful companies in the world - often under considerable criticism and consumer pressure -

began an effort to eliminate sweatshop conditions in Asia, worker abuse is still commonplace in many of the Chinese factories that supply Western companies, according to workers' rights groups. The groups say some Chinese companies routinely shortchange their employees on wages, withhold health benefits and expose their workers to dangerous machinery and harmful chemicals, like lead, cadmium and mercury ([Risks 337](#)). In recent weeks, a flood of reports detailing labour abuse have been released. In a 58-page report, the New York-based National Labor Committee scolded Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, for not doing more to protect workers. “At Wal-Mart, Christmas ornaments are cheap, and so are the lives of the young workers in China who make them,” the National Labor Committee report said. Many experts say part of the problem is cost: Western companies are constantly pressing their Chinese suppliers for lower prices while also insisting that factory owners spend more to upgrade operations, treat workers properly and improve product quality. Many brand-name companies, like IKEA, have shifted the overwhelming majority of their manufacturing operations to China.

- [New York Times. International Herald Tribune. National Labor Committee.](#)

Europe: Euro MPs call for work disease action

Euro MPs have called for measures to protect workers from a new generation of health threats at work. The all-party European Parliament employment committee wants a Europe-wide drive against cancer-causing exposures in the workplace as well as measures to combat musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain and repetitive strain injuries. Socialist spokesperson on the committee, Stephen Hughes, said: “The European Commission has proposed to cut accidents at work by 25 per cent throughout the EU. We need similar ambitious targets for cuts in occupational diseases and cancers.” British Labour MEP Glenis Willmott, who drafted the employment committee report adopted in

December 2007, said: “We need new EU legislation to deal with new and emerging risks and where the existing laws have proved to be inadequate. In particular, we need binding new limit values for cancer-causing substances, such as crystalline silica, which can cause pulmonary diseases.” The report approved by the employment committee is critical of the European Commission’s strategy, which was last year slammed by unions as the “poorest yet” ([Risks 296](#)). The Euro MPs committee echoed the union concerns, expressing “regret” that the strategy “is silent on targets for the reduction of occupational diseases but understands the difficulty in measuring occupational diseases; therefore urges the Commission to further develop the necessary statistical instruments, put in place the necessary measures and ensure that the necessary research is carried out in order to ensure that occupational diseases and in particular cancers are correctly identified, recognised and addressed.” It also called for improved control standards for a wider range of carcinogens, mutagens and reprotoxins.

- [Socialist Group of MEPs \(PES\) news release. HESA news report.](#)
- European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs report [[pdf](#)].

South Korea: Warehouse inferno kills 40

Firefighters say 40 people are now believed to have died in a 7 January fire at a warehouse in South Korea. Hundreds of firefighters were involved in efforts to contain the blaze at Icheon, 80km (50 miles) south of Seoul. Witnesses reported hearing loud explosions coming from the basement of the building. Kim Jung-keun of the Icheon fire department said the exact cause of the fire, which started in the morning, was not known. But he said that workers were injecting urethane foam into the walls of the facility in its basement when the fire started. Kim also said the explosions heard at the site were caused by the fire, not the other way around. A total of 10 people injured in the blaze were receiving

treatment at local hospitals for burns and smoke inhalation, Kim said. Senior fire department official Choi Jin-jong told Korea's Yonhap news agency that the explosions had destroyed the firefighting equipment in the basement, making it harder to tackle the blaze. Firefighting efforts were also hampered by thick, toxic smoke coming from the basement. Yonhap reported that 57 people were in the building, a newly built cold storage facility, when the fire broke out.

- [The Standard](#). [Xinhua](#). [BBC News Online](#).

USA: Deadly lung risk to kitchen staff

Restaurant workers could face serious health risks from exposure to the flavouring ingredient diacetyl. The chemical, an artificial butter flavouring, is a common ingredient in the margarines, shortenings and cooking oils and sprays used in commercial kitchens. It has been found to cause the lung-destroying condition bronchiolitis obliterans in popcorn workers, but the risk to other groups of workers has been largely overlooked. Heated for cooking, these ingredients release the deadly vapours, a study commissioned by the US newspaper the Seattle Post-Intelligencer found. Commenting on the paper’s findings, Dr Richard Kanwal of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): “It is possible that the amount of diacetyl being released in commercial kitchens where these butter-flavoured products are being used could equal or perhaps exceed what was found in the popcorn plants.” US union UNITE-HERE, which represents kitchen workers in restaurants, hotels and catering, responded to publication of the study results with a call for action. “It is completely unacceptable that working cooks should have to put their lungs at risk just to complete a day's orders,” the union said. Scientists who took part in the research estimate that diacetyl is used in some 6,000 commercial products in the US. Global foodworkers’ union federation IUF said it was not aware of any comparable estimates for the rest of the world. IUF says regulatory authorities in the European Union “acknowledge that the

product is extensively used in processed foods, but have been content to reiterate that diacetyl has been declared safe... for human consumption. The problem remains that the potential risks facing food processing and kitchen workers have never been properly investigated despite mounting evidence that diacetyl exposure can lead to serious illness and even death.” IUF’s Peter Rossman said: “We've been trying to generate regulatory action in other parts of the world, and have also sounded the alarm on diacetyl.” Celeste Monforton of the respected safety blog The Pump Handle expressed concern that it was left to a newspaper to identify a risk to hundreds of thousands of kitchen staff. “Frankly, we should be exasperated by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer’s study. We’ve come to rely on a newspaper to do our public health investigations?” She added: “How much gumption does it really take to buy a few samples of the cooking oil and grease used in restaurants, and set up a test kitchen to see how much diacetyl is emitted?”

- **What’s new** in the [HSC/E](#) and the [European Agency](#).
- [HSE Books](#), PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA. Tel: 01787 881165; fax: 01787 313995

- [IUF news release](#). [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#) and [follow up article on union call for action](#). [The Pump Handle](#).

EVENTS AND COURSES

TUC courses for safety reps

COURSES FOR JANUARY TO MARCH 2008

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

USEFUL LINKS

- **Visit** the TUC http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/ website pages on health and safety. See what’s on offer from [TUC Publications](#) and [What’s On in health and safety](#).
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