



# 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](#).

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## UNION NEWS

Cuts concern cabin crew at Thomas Cook

Moves to cut the numbers of cabin crew on eight out of 10 Thomas Cook short haul flights has sparked an angry reaction from staff. The Unite members say the planned imposition of minimum numbers on all short haul flights over 3 hours 40 minutes could now lead to a full strike vote unless the company agrees to honour its agreed procedures with the union. “The company plans to cut cabin crew on these flights to the minimum legal safety requirement,” said Unite’s Kevin Hall. “This, in turn, will place extreme pressures on all our members who are simply trying to make flights as enjoyable as possible for the flying public going on holiday.” He said there was real disappointment the company is seeking to impose the changes in breach of agreed procedures. “Passengers need only remember the recent events at Heathrow and the importance of the job cabin crew do in a time of emergency to see that this cannot be good for the flying public or our members,” he stressed. Unite will be seeking further meetings with Thomas Cook senior managers with the possibility of going to the arbitration service Acas not ruled out. “We want to avert a strike ballot,” said Mr Hall. “But should talks and Acas fail then we will seek the legal authority for the strike vote.”

- [Unite news release.](#)

**York rail workers vote for safety strike**

Safety critical staff in Network Rail's electrical control room at York have voted unanimously for industrial action over the company's plan to cut the number of operators there by a third, from 18 to 12. Their union, RMT, this week told the company that pushing through drastic staff cuts despite serious unresolved health and safety issues was “unacceptable”. The union's 10 members in the control room voted unanimously both for strike action and action short of a strike unless the company enters negotiations. “The proposed staffing levels will leave the electrical control room severely exposed in the event of any incident, and we are not prepared to allow safety to be compromised just to satisfy Network

Rail's balance sheet,” RMT general secretary Bob Crow said. “There has been no consultation with our local reps, our request that the proposals are put on hold pending proper discussions has fallen on deaf ears, and once more Network Rail is refusing to apply the agreed procedure for dealing with displaced staff.” He added “you can get no clearer than a unanimous vote for action. Network Rail needs to understand that it must address the serious safety issues that our members have been raising.”

- [RMT news release.](#)

**Tube workers back safety action**

London Underground workers have voted to strike in a row over safety and ticket office closures. The Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) said its 3,000 members supported strike action by 4-1. The union’s concerns include “a raft of safety issues”, among them the closure of some ticket offices and the use of agency and security staff ([Risks 346](#)). “The size of the vote clearly demonstrates what our members feel about what they perceive as an attack on safety standards and the casualisation of safety critical work,” said TSSA general secretary Gerry Doherty. He added: “We hope that London Underground now recognise that feeling and will reach a sensible agreement with us which ensures that London has the safest Tube system in the world in the run up to the Olympic Games in four years time.” Rail union RMT also plans to ballot its members on the use of agency staff and the closure of ticket offices.

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

**Union pushes for slipped disc payout**

A support worker who slipped a disc while pushing a client in a wheelchair, and subsequently had his employment terminated,

has secured damages from his former employer. UNISON member Malcolm Herbert from Croydon secured a one off settlement of £15,500 from Choice Support, which provides services for adults with learning disabilities. Mr Herbert said: “My role as a support worker involved pushing a patient up and down a steep road on a regular basis. I made a number of complaints that this was hurting my back but they were ignored.” He said he suffered the injury while pushing a client in a wheelchair down an extremely steep hill. “I felt an excruciating pain in my back, which got worse over the next few weeks. I was then told I’d slipped a disc and was off work for over eight months.” UNISON regional officer Jeanette Roe commented: “It is important that where employees are expected to carry out tasks which involve lifting, pushing or pulling heavy loads that their employers have carried out a risk assessment and have reduced the need to carry out the task to the lowest possible level.” His lawyer, Vincent Reynolds from Thompsons Solicitors, said: “Although Malcolm Herbert had a pre-existing back problem, the consultant neurosurgeon confirmed that his accident brought forward his symptoms by over two years. Otherwise, he could have continued working until the normal retirement age of 65.” He added: “Mr Herbert is now 64, and with a history of back problems and having lost his most recent - and physically undemanding - employment because of his medical condition, the chances of him finding employment are very small.”

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release.](#)

### Casualisation ‘is killing construction workers’

Construction union UCATT has warned that increasing casualisation in the industry is killing site workers. Speaking after six workers were injured this week in a Belfast building collapse, four seriously, UCATT regional organiser Michael Kiddle said: “This latest accident underlines just how dangerous the construction industry remains. Casualisation is literally killing construction workers. The recent death toll is a

stain on the industry.” Witnesses said some workers fell about 30ft and had to be pulled free from steel girders, scaffolding and rubble in the incident during the construction of a six-storey block. The Health and Safety Executive is investigating. UCATT officials report that private sector developments have become increasingly casualised in recent years, a move that has reduced the number of independent union safety reps and led to corners being cut on health and safety. The union says private sites compare poorly with the public sector in Northern Ireland, where the Northern Ireland Executive has introduced health and safety clauses into public sector contracts. UCATT says these contract compliance measures have led to a halving of fatalities on public sector projects.

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

## OTHER NEWS

### Roadside workers face brain peril

Half an hour of sniffing diesel fumes in a busy city street is enough to induce a "stress response" in the brain and could cause lasting problems, according to a new study. Scientists have known nanoparticles – which include particulate matter in diesel exhaust fumes - reach the brain when inhaled, but this is the first time they have been shown to affect how we process information. The Dutch researchers sought to replicate the environment experienced by those who work in a garage or by the roadside. Their findings were published in the online journal Particle and Fibre Toxicology. The team at Zuyd University in the Netherlands persuaded 10 volunteers to spend an hour in a room filled either with clean air or exhaust from a diesel engine. They were monitored an electroencephalograph (EEG) during the period of exposure and for an hour after they left the room. After about 30 minutes, the brains of those in the exhaust rooms displayed a stress response indicative of a change in the way information is being processed in the brain cortex. This effect continued after they

were no longer in the room. “We can only speculate what these effects may mean for the chronic exposure to air pollution encountered in busy cities where the levels of such soot particles can be very high,” said lead researcher Paul Borm. “It is conceivable that the long-term effects of exposure to traffic nanoparticles may interfere with normal brain function and information processing. Further studies are necessary to explore this effect and to assess the relationship between the amount of exposure to particles and the brain's response, and investigate the clinical implications of these novel findings.”

- Bjoern Cruts, Ludo van Etten, Hakan Tornqvist, Anders Blomberg, Thomas Sandstrom, Nicholas L Mills, Paul JA Borm. Exposure to diesel exhaust induces changes in EEG in human volunteers, Particle and Fibre Toxicology, volume 5, number 4, 2008 [[abstract](#) and full paper ([provisional pdf](#))]. [PlanetArk](#). [BBC News Online](#). [The Guardian](#).

### HSE issues low key diacetyl warning

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has put out a low key warning about the risk from diacetyl, a food flavouring that is widely used in the UK and that has been linked to hundreds of cases of serious occupational lung disease in the US. The two paragraph HSE note, which was not press released, warns: “A number of workers in the popcorn industry in the USA have developed severe lung disease after inhaling fumes from a flavouring agent known as diacetyl (2-3-butanedione) which imparts a butter flavour to food.” It adds “workers mixing the liquid in concentrated bulk form before adding to foodstuffs can be exposed to vapour that is extremely irritating to the eyes, nose, throat and lungs. In some cases permanent lung damage may occur when the small airways in the lungs become blocked by inflammation.” HSE recommends the standard Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations hierarchy of controls be applied. Although the HSE note implies diacetyl related disease is a problem in the US popcorn industry, there has

already been one UK case identified at a multinational food flavouring firm supplying a wide-range of food producers ([Risks 345](#)). A report last month in Hazards magazine warned there are almost certainly many more cases in the UK of the potentially fatal lung condition caused by diacetyl, bronchiolitis obliterans, but these are being misdiagnosed as the more common Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or asthma. The outbreak in the US followed this pattern, with the occupational link only finally made years after the first cases emerged. In an 11 March written answer to a parliamentary question from Liberal Democrat MP Mike Hancock on diacetyl risks in the UK, DWP parliamentary under-secretary of state Anne McGuire replied: “No research has been commissioned by the government or the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). However, the Health and Safety Executive accepted the evidence from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the United States of America as the basis for alerting the food industry to the potential inhalation risks to workers from diacetyl in 2004.” The reported UK case resulted from workplace diacetyl exposures in 2005.

- [HSE diacetyl alert. Food: Industrial health and safety, Hansard written answer, 11 March 2008. NIOSH flavourings topic page.](#)
- [I can't believe it's not deadly: Food flavour wrecks lungs](#), Hazards magazine diacetyl feature and resources.

### Lead exposure still a problem

The number of workers under medical surveillance for lead exposure rose last year. In 2006/07, 8,697 workers were monitored for blood levels of the metal, which can cause serious occupational health problems including cancer, anaemia, kidney and brain damage in chronically exposed workers. Latest Health and Safety Executive (HSE) figures show the number under surveillance was up from 8,618 in 2005/06. Most exposures occurred in the lead

battery and metal processing industries and in work with metallic lead and lead containing alloys. In 2006/07, a total of 28 males were suspended from work due to levels of blood lead exceeding 60 µg/100ml. HSE says the proportion of men with relatively high blood lead measurements remained broadly level between 2001/02 and 2005/06; the 2006/07 figures showed a drop in the total level of high blood lead measurements. In each of these years approximately 1 per cent of male workers had blood lead levels at or above 60µg/100ml, down from just under 2 per cent in 1998/99. In 2006/07, there were 309 males with blood lead levels at or above 50µg/100ml. Of these, 175 were in the lead battery industry; 29 in work with metallic lead and lead containing alloys; 28 in the smelting, refining, alloying and casting industry and 29 in other processes. The proportion of lead exposed female workers with blood lead levels at or above 30µg/100ml fluctuated around the 4 per cent mark from 2000/01 to 2004/05. In the two latest years, the proportion has fallen to around 2.5 per cent. These levels are not safe levels. Top occupational and environmental lead exposure expert Dr Herbert Needleman, professor of child psychiatry and paediatrics at the University Of Pittsburgh School Of Medicine, has warned that levels of just 10µg/100ml can cause a measurable drop in IQ.

- [HSE lead statistics.](#)

### Toxic chemical leak causes concern

Two workers were taken to hospital and more than 30 firefighters drafted in after a serious chemical leak in Sheffield this week. Fire crews from five stations were called to the Viridor Waste Management site on 11 March after highly toxic hydrogen sulphide gas was released accidentally during a waste treatment process. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Environment Agency are investigating the incident. Commenting after the incident, Dan Cooke, Viridor's external affairs manager, said: "There appears to have been a release of

sulphide gas. Two male members of staff have been taken to hospital as a precaution." He added: "This is an incident that we are treating very seriously. As a company we are fully committed to the health and safety of all of our employees and surrounding communities. A full and thorough investigation is underway into the cause of the release and we will be working closely with the HSE and the Environment Agency to establish the facts." Members of the public were also concerned. One motorist who was passing the site told local paper the Sheffield Star the smell "was so strong that my eyes started to water almost straightaway and I had to pull over. It frightened me to death because I just didn't know what was happening. I could see bus passengers coughing and rubbing their eyes too, so it affected a lot of people." Both hospitalised workers were sent home the same day. Hydrogen sulphide's International Chemical Safety Card exposure warning says "Avoid all contact!", adding that anyone exposed should "Consult a doctor!"

- [Viridor news release. Sheffield Star.](#)
- [NIOSH hydrogen sulphide topic page. International Chemical Safety Card: Hydrogen sulphide.](#)

### Injury destroys young worker's dream

A construction site injury has crushed the dreams of a Barnsley man who has lost the opportunity to play semi-professional football. James Smith was 20 and working as a steel fixer for Century Reinforcement Services when he was injured in 2004. He was in a trench on the site at Sheffield Airport Business Centre when two bundles of steel bars fell from a JCB, trapping his ankle. His solicitor Lisa Fairclough, from law firm Irwin Mitchell, said: "The steel bars were being carried using a JCB and fell from their position after the driver tipped the bars without instruction or any warning to James. He sustained a fracture to his ankle as a result of the accident. After undergoing surgery to fix the fracture he eventually returned to playing football but

within two years his ankle broke again at the weak point that had been created because of the original injury.” She added: “This case highlights the importance of contractors on site ensuring that proper arrangements are made to transport materials. The materials here needed to be moved and this was done on an ad hoc basis without proper arrangements for banking of the load.” James has since received a £22,500 compensation payout for his injuries.

- [Irwin Mitchell news release.](#)

### **Clothing company work led to cancer**

A woman who was exposed to asbestos while working for a clothes factory when she was a teenager is to receive more than £135,000 in compensation. Pauline Cade, 65, was diagnosed with the incurable asbestos cancer mesothelioma in March 2006. She was exposed while working as a junior clerk for Thomas Marshall (Marlbeck) Ltd, a clothing company in Leeds that made items for small drapers and department stores. Asbestos was used in the factory on steam pipes and protective pads used to press garments. Pauline, who was only 16 at the time, said she remembered the asbestos would often fall from the ceiling. She added that one of her jobs was to sweep the asbestos from the cellar floor. She said: “I remember sweeping the cages out and coming out of the cellar covered from head to toe with dust. The dust used to get into my hair and clothes, and it used to make me cough.” She added: “It was never about the money. I wanted justice for my condition. I was so young when I worked there. It was a good job but I had no idea that it would lead me here. If it was a choice between the money and my health I would take my health any day.” Tom Carden from Riding Asbestos Support & Awareness Group (RASAG) has been supporting Pauline. He said: “As an asbestos support group we are seeing a steady increase in the number of enquiries about asbestos related disease, with people having been diagnosed some 30 to 40 years after their initial exposure.”

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release.](#)

### **Kings College not so clever on asbestos**

Kings College, Cambridge, has been prosecuted after painters were exposed to asbestos containing materials while working at the college. It was fined £16,000 with £14,500 costs at Cambridge Magistrates Court last week after pleading guilty to eight breaches of the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006. The college clerk of works Geoff Cunnington was also was fined £1,000 with £500 costs after pleading guilty to breaching the Health and Safety at Work Act. The prosecution arose following an incident on 29 November 2006, when a number of college employees, who were painting asbestos containing material, were exposed to asbestos fibres. A Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation found that Kings College had allowed its employees to work on asbestos containing materials without taking the appropriate precautions. HSE principal inspector David Head commented: “The exposure of employees to asbestos at Kings College could and should have been avoided by straightforward safety precautions. HSE will not hesitate to take action against those who fall short of the law in such a way.” He added: “Asbestos must be properly managed to prevent people dying from asbestos diseases in the future. If you are responsible for managing the maintenance and repair of a building, you must manage any asbestos in it. HSE has provided guidance to help people understand what they have to do to comply with their legal obligations.”

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

### **Molten zinc burns lead to fine**

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is reminding employers to ensure they adequately assess the risks of hazardous work. The reminder follows HSE's prosecution of a Hereford company after an employee received 12 per cent burns after being splashed with molten metal. Hereford Galvanizers Ltd was fined £13,000 and ordered to pay costs of £6,564 after pleading guilty at Hereford Magistrates Court to safety offences. The prosecution followed a June 2006 incident where an employee helping with galvanising operations was splashed with 450-degree molten zinc when the hooks suspending two steel joists, each weighing approximately 1,165kg (over 1 tonne), gave way causing the joists to plunge back into the dip bath. Part of his overalls dissolved and he sustained 12 per cent burns, mainly to his chest and upper arms. Speaking after the case, HSE's inspector Paul Humphries said: "Even the most basic risk assessment would have highlighted the need to supply clothing specifically designed to cope with such high temperature molten metal. Routine assessments and maintenance of the lifting equipment may also have shown that the lifting hooks had become inadequate to support that weight."

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

### **'Shabby' lab blamed for disease**

An independent review of last year's foot-and-mouth outbreak has criticised the laboratory at the source of the disease as "shabby and dilapidated". The report's author, Dr Iain Anderson, said the foot-and-mouth leak should never have escaped the government-run Pirbright complex in Surrey. He identified bad regulation by several organisations, including the Department of the Environment (Defra). The government says Defra will no longer regulate the laboratory. The Pirbright complex was identified as the likely source of two foot-and-mouth outbreaks in 2007. An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) blamed bio-security lapses at Pirbright, occurring after a

tree root damaged a laboratory pipe containing the foot-and-mouth virus. Dr Anderson identified leadership and regulation problems at the site and called for the creation of a new body - the National Institute of Infectious Diseases - to run the laboratories in future. In his report, Dr Anderson, who also led the inquiry into the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth, said that there had been a "creeping degradation of standards" at Pirbright. He described regulation and risk management standards as poor. Environment secretary Hilary Benn, responding in a written ministerial statement, said Defra is working closely with HSE and other departments to implement improvements.

- [Defra news release](#). [BBC News Online](#).
- [Foot and Mouth Disease 2007: A Review and Lessons Learned \[full report pdf\]](#). [HSE Pirbright webpages](#).

## **INTERNATIONAL NEWS**

### **Australia: Luxury hotels serve up agony for workers**

Luxury hotel workers in Australia have launched a national campaign for better pay and conditions after an investigation revealed record injury rates and the highest staff turnover of any industry. Research by hotel workers' union LHMU revealed "devastating staff turnover levels, record injury rates, dangerous workloads, bullying by management and Australia's biggest number of low paid workers." Commenting at the launch of its 'Rescue package for luxury hotels' report, LHMU national secretary Louise Tarrant, said: "Luxury hotels are enjoying unprecedented occupancy but can't attract or retain workers. A critical shortage of workers and the highest staff turnover of any industry in Australia (48 per cent per annum) are creating an epidemic of injuries in luxury hotels." She added: "Our research has exposed alarming working conditions in these hotels including the worst injury rates for working women in Australia and

an overall injury rate of 9.7 per annum only fractionally behind the notorious construction industry. Working in the laundries, bedrooms, kitchens and restaurants of luxury hotels is heavy and dangerous work. This year 1 in 10 of Australia's 30,000 luxury hotels workers can expect to be injured at work." She said the union's rescue package for the industry highlights how luxury hotels will face a recruitment and retention crisis "unless hotels create safe, rewarding and secure jobs for prospective workers."

- [LHMU news release](#), luxury jobs factsheet [pdf] and [better hotel jobs campaign website](#).
- [The Australian. News.com.au](#).

#### Global: Private equity buyout of toxics firm

A giant private equity fund is to take control of a multinational pesticide producer. Permira – which has faced union criticism in the UK after dangerous reductions in staffing after the buyout of AA ([Risks 287](#)) - has got the go-ahead from the European Commission to purchase agrochemical company Arysta LifeScience. Japan-based Arysta is the tenth-largest agrochemical multinational by market share, with over 2,300 employees in 120 countries. It manufactures a range of agrochemicals, including herbicides, pesticides and fumigants, as well as pharmaceutical and veterinary products. Global foodworkers' union federation IUF has warned the buyout, which is largely financed by borrowing, "can be considered an experiment in the impact on human health of cash flow management in the service of enormous debt when applied to the production of toxic agrochemicals." It adds that among the company's more toxic branded products are the herbicide Trevissimo, a 50/50 cocktail of glyphosate and diuron for use on vines (diuron, a suspected carcinogen, is classified in the US as a developmental toxin); fungicide Sigma DG (80 per cent captan, a known carcinogen); fungicide Banko 500 (chlorothalonil, classified as carcinogenic in the EU); insecticide Rocky

(endosulfan, highly hazardous and banned in the EU); Calfos (profenophos, a hazardous neurotoxin); and Mitac WP (amitraz, recognised in the US as a developmental and reproductive toxin). "All of these are hazardous products which the IUF has long advocated banning in view of their threat to human life and health," commented IUF. It is questioning whether Arysta's "stated commitment" to social responsibility could be a casualty of the buyout.

- [IUF Private Equity Buyout Watch](#).

#### Global: Toxics trade convention in jeopardy

A treaty intended to ensure the worst industrial poisons aren't traded globally without health and safety warnings is in jeopardy because of lobbying by vested interests. A global alliance of environmental, labour movement and health groups is sounding the alarm, saying "industry interference and political sabotage by a handful of countries, led by Canada, is strangling the Rotterdam Convention". The problem stems from a rearguard action by supporters of the asbestos industry, led by the Canadian government, who are determined to stop the listing of white (chrysotile) asbestos. Under Convention rules, an expert body - the Chemical Review Committee - recommends whether a hazardous product has met the criteria of the Convention and should be placed on a special list. This requires countries to obtain 'Prior Informed Consent' before they can export the product to another country. At its last meeting in 2006, over one hundred countries approved the committee's recommendation that chrysotile be listed. But Canada, backed by a handful of other asbestos producers, vetoed the move ([Risks 279](#)). Canada argued that unless every single country agrees, no action should be taken. "This is a death sentence for the Convention," said Joan Kuyek of Mining Watch Canada. Laurie Kazan-Allen of the Ban Asbestos International Secretariat commented: "If chrysotile asbestos, a known deadly carcinogen, which fully met all the requirements of the Convention can be prevented from being listed, then the Convention is in

grave peril.” A joint statement from the group concludes: “Our message to them is – Stop the sabotage. Let the Convention do its job of protecting lives.”

- [Rotterdam Treaty campaign statement.](#)  
[RightOnCanada asbestos webpage.](#)

## RESOURCES

### New chemicals health monitor

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) has launched a new Chemicals Health Monitor website - an online source of information about chemicals and related diseases. HEAL says the new resource “provides a comprehensive compilation of recent information and evidence” about the links between chemical contaminants and ill health. It includes a list of several diseases and conditions - asthma, autism, breast cancer, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, endometriosis, infertility, obesity, Parkinson’s disease, prostate cancer, testicular cancer, Testicular Dysgenesis Syndrome - associated with chemical contamination. There’s also information on risk factors associated with these different human health conditions, trends in specific disease incidence, and disease-specific costs. The polished new resource also includes an introduction to and latest news on chemical safety policy, especially the European Union chemicals legislation REACH.

- [HEAL news release.](#) [Chemicals Health Monitor website.](#)

### Women and work hazards

International Women’s Day, 8 February, prompted a number of organisations to create new or dust off their old materials on women and work hazards. The Health and Safety Executive gave a big push to its online advice for

new and expectant mothers. The webpages include advice aimed at mothers and mums-to-be and health professionals alongside case studies and answers to frequently asked questions. The European Agency for Health and Safety at Work, meanwhile, pulled together its resources in one handy webpage. And the global construction union federation BWI created new worker-friendly webpages on women and work hazards.

- [HSE mothers at work webpages.](#) [European Agency gender issues in health and safety at work webpages.](#) [BWI women and work hazards webpages.](#)
- Also see: [TUC women’s health and safety webpages](#) and [Hazards at Work women’s chapter](#) and [Hazards women and work hazards webpages.](#)

### HSE on DSE

The Health and Safety Executive has launched new webpages offering display screen equipment related information, advice and guidance. The resource includes answers to frequently asked questions, a DSE assessment checklist, case histories and other resources.

- [HSE display screen equipment \(DSE\) webpages.](#)

## EVENTS AND COURSES

### TUC courses for safety reps

#### COURSES FOR SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 2006

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

### USEFUL LINKS

- Visit the TUC [http://www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_sl/](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_sl/)

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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