



Changing Times News

Number 107 Summer 2009

The Changing Times E-bulletin is the TUC's online news service on work/life balance issues. It is written by the [Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion](#) and edited by the TUC. Comments should be sent to [Nicola Smith](#). If you have stories that you would like us to include in this bulletin please email [Nicola](#) directly. To subscribe or unsubscribe from this bulletin please visit the [TUC website](#).

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LEGISLATION AND REGULATION

Agency workers face pay discrimination and want more rights, says TUC poll

A [survey of agency workers](#) has found that it is not just low paid and unskilled agency workers who face discrimination and poor treatment at work. The survey, published by the TUC as EU Agency Workers Directive consultation ended, finds there are complaints of bad treatment across the skill and income spectrum, and strong demand from agency workers for better rights. The recession and growing unemployment are now forcing many more people to accept temporary work.

The survey was released as the government consultation on giving agency workers equal treatment to directly employed staff (after they've worked a 12-week qualifying period) closed on 31 July.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: "There is nothing wrong with agency work. There will always be some people looking for short-term jobs and employers who need short-term staff. What is wrong is when employers use agency staff to undermine pay and conditions and fill permanent jobs with staff who only have temporary rights..."

"This is why the TUC will be calling for the Government to introduce a fair deal for agency workers when implementing the Temporary Agency Workers Directive in the UK. Agency workers must have the right to equal treatment on pay, including basic pay, bonuses, and redundancy pay, and to equal treatment on holidays and working time."

Unions' responses to the EU Agency Workers Directive

[UNISON](#) has urged the government to implement the EU Agency Workers Directive in full during this Parliament and to "take a wide view of basic employment rights and the definition of agency workers". Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary, said:

"We want to see, for example, agency workers getting paid maternity, paternity and adoption leave. They should also be entitled to bonuses, training, redundancy and holiday pay, and have access to workplace facilities such as childcare and transport services. The Directive must include a broad and clear definition of agency workers, leaving unscrupulous employers no loopholes to get around the law. "We expect savings to be made and service quality to improve in some areas of the public sector, if more temporary posts are filled by permanent staff as a result of this directive".

The [GMB's response](#) to the consultation on the directive forms one of its motions to the 2009 TUC Congress in Liverpool. The union calls on the government to bring forward regulations to implement the EU Temporary Agency Workers Directive by spring of 2010.

Paul Kenny, GMB General Secretary, said: "It is time for justice for temporary and agency

workers who have been used and abused and disposed of at five minutes' notice – often after years of working in the same place in the same job. This motion to TUC Congress sets out how GMB wants the regulations drafted to eliminate further exploitation.”

Government Equalities Office holds Equality Bill stakeholder events

The Government Equalities Office will be holding four events on the Equality Bill in September to explain what the bill will mean in practice, and give stakeholders a chance to feed into the two ongoing consultations on age discrimination in services and the public sector equality duty.

The events will be held on the 1 September in Wales, 2 September in central England, 3 September in Scotland and 4 September in the south of England.

EU legislation has increased protection against gender discrimination, says report

An EU Directive has been effective in giving workers broader protection against gender bias and providing clearer definitions of discrimination, [according a report from the European Commission](#). Directive 2002/73/EC, which aims to promote equality for men and women in access to employment, vocational training, promotions and working conditions, has been implemented satisfactorily by most member states, according to the report. However, research shows that national equality bodies still have a critical role in furthering equality, particularly in assisting victims of discrimination, who are more likely to turn to an equality body than to traditional litigation.

Working time differs greatly across Europe

There are substantial differences in working time between the former EU15 member states and the majority of the new EU member states (NMS12), according to the annual update on working time developments from [Eurofound](#), the Dublin-based EU Agency. The report, ‘Working time developments 2008’, finds the average working week in the EU15 was 37.9 hours in 2008 (the

same as in 2007) but that it was longer in the NMS12 – 39.5 hours, a difference of 1.6 hours or 4.2%.

The longest weeks worked by full-time employees in their main jobs are found in Romania (41.8 hours), the Czech Republic (41.7 hours) and Latvia (41.7 hours). The shortest are in France (38.4 hours), Belgium (38.6 hours) and Ireland (38.9 hours). Only three of the EU15 countries have working weeks longer than the average for the entire EU27; by contrast, workers in 10 of the 12 new member states work longer weeks than the EU27 average, according to the report.

The report has discovered that the working week in the EU15 member states has decreased: average agreed weekly working hours have fallen from 38.6 hours to 37.9 hours – a decrease of 1.8%. While the working week has also reduced in the 10 member states that joined in 2004 (the NMS10), the reduction has been less: since 2003, average agreed weekly working hours declined by only 0.2 hours or 0.5%, down from 39.6 hours to 39.4.

EU Working Time Directive comes into force for junior doctors

The European Working Time Directive, enshrined in UK law in 1998, became fully applicable to junior doctors on 1 August, reducing the maximum hours worked from an average of 56 per week to 48.

[According to the BBC](#), doctors’ organisations have criticised the European Working Time Directive, saying the reduced hours means there is too little time to provide training.

During the 1990s junior doctors worked 100 hours per week on average. The directive took effect for many other workers in 1998, but the changes to reduce doctors’ working hours were incremental and began with consultants. By 2004, junior doctors were included in a 58-hour working week target and by 2007 this was down to a 56-hour week. Contracts asking trainee doctors to work outside the regulations will be illegal and all rotas must be based on the 48-

hour model. Individual doctors can choose to opt out but this must be a voluntary decision. Doctors cannot opt out of taking 11 hours' continuous rest out of 24, or ensuring they have 24 hours' continuous rest every seven days, under the newly enshrined legislation.

Dr Andy Thornley, Chairman of the BMA junior doctors committee, said: "We are not reassured by government reports that the NHS is 97% compliant with the new working time regulation as we fear many junior doctors are being pressured to lie about their hours... And our members are worried about their training; many feel it has reduced in quality as working hours have been reduced."

A TUC spokesperson said "Excessive working time damages the quality of healthcare. The NHS must ensure that those who are still struggling can learn from the majority of hospitals who are already managing the new rules."

FAMILIES AND CARERS

Maternity pay under threat from proposals outlined by right wing think tank

'[Productive parents](#)' Maternity pay under threat from proposals outlined by right wing think tank 'Productive parents' a report by right wing think tank Reform recommends replacing current maternity pay with a flat rate 'parental payment' spread over six months and paid to both the mother and father. This would give six months of unpaid leave to both the mother and father, and significantly reduce existing maternity pay entitlements for the majority of working mothers.

A TUC spokesperson: "While it is important that fathers are enabled to play a more active role in caring for young children and that paternity leave is increased, this should not be at the expense of existing maternity pay entitlements. Cuts in maternity pay would lead to catastrophic falls in income for working families, and would make it impossible for many to take up their leave entitlements."

Out-of-hours school funding increased to help parents stay at work

Children's Minister, Dawn Primarolo, has announced that [schools offering extended services](#) will soon receive a financial boost, thanks to government funding of £167m, to be divided between local authorities across the country. The money is part of the extended services subsidy which was allocated £8.5m in 2008-09, £40m in 2009-10 and £167m in 2010-11. The services, which provide children with innovative activities to do before and after school, allow parents to stay at work for longer. Over 80% of primary and secondary schools already offer out-of-hours services, and the increased funding will help these schools to meet their targets by 2010. In 2001, the 'Schools: achieving success' white paper outlined the government's commitment to all schools to providing access to a core offer of extended services by 2010.

Sure Start services successfully helping children and parents

More than half of Sure Start centres are effectively integrating their services to support disadvantaged children and parents to make positive changes in their lives, says a survey published [by Ofsted](#). The survey, 'The impact of integrated services on children and their families in Sure Start children's centres', looked at 20 centres in six local authorities in the most deprived areas of the country, to reach its conclusion. In 15 centres, leadership and management were rated 'good' or 'outstanding'.

More quality childcare to help development of disadvantaged children

Childcare providers that Ofsted deems to be operating at 'good' or 'outstanding' levels may soon be able to offer up to 15 hours of free childcare to disadvantaged children, following [an evaluation of the free childcare for two-year-olds pilot](#). Good quality childcare settings improve the relationship between parents and children and have a noticeable impact on children's development, the evaluation finds, whereas less adequate settings have no positive impact. As a result, up to 15% of the most disadvantaged

two-year-olds in the country will benefit from extra hours of free childcare, provided in settings which offer quality early education. The evaluation also highlights the growing value parents and carers place on childcare and financial support offered by the government.

Encouraging couples to share parental leave: economic incentives ‘very important’

A new paper from [the Institute for the Study of Labor](#) outlines OECD countries which have implemented successful policies to induce couples to share parental leave. The paper looks at how changes in economic incentives affect couples’ likelihood of sharing parental leave. Nordic countries, Denmark in particular, are the most progressive when it comes to family-friendly policies, according to the report. An extensive reform of child leave schemes in Denmark affected couples differently depending on which sectors parents were employed in, according to the report. The report concludes that economic incentives are ‘very important for intra-household leave-sharing’.

‘Organisational greed’ puts pressures on family life

Even though many countries and organisations offer flexible working arrangements, parents are often deterred from taking these up, according to a [new book on work and families](#). The EU-funded book, entitled ‘Work, families and organisations in transition: European perspectives’, describes how parents working in the finance and public sectors in seven European Union countries manage their work and family lives.

One of the book’s authors, Professor Lewis, says: “Our study shows that work-life policies are sorely needed, but even where they exist, they are often undermined by global forces. Work intensification and constant change fuel such a sense of insecurity that many parents dare not ask to change their hours or take time off for fear they are seen not to be pulling their weight.” The book also shows that working mothers still bear the brunt of family responsibilities.

Low awareness of right to request flexible working

[Survey results published by the DWP](#) show that 50% of people do not know which employees have the right to request flexible working, and only 20% of people can name one or more of the groups covered by the right to request.

Furthermore, those survey respondents who had the right to flexible working were no more likely than other respondents to know which groups were covered. Of the 3,000 people interviewed, 69% claimed that they currently work flexibly, and 91% report having at least one flexible working arrangement available to them.

Part-time work and loss of hours disguising the impact of unemployment on working families says the ACTU

While 3,000 full-time workers lost their job each week last month in Australia, the dependence on part-time work to slow down a further decline in unemployment is also putting real financial pressure on working Australians and their families, according to the [Australian Council of Trade Unions](#) (ACTU). ACTU President Sharan Burrow says, “The benchmark for economic recovery must be jobs growth for both full-time and part-time work, not simply switching between the two forms of employment.”

Union members more likely to take advantage of family-friendly benefits in the workplace, according to report

Union members are more likely to take up family friendly benefits in their jobs, according to a recent report jointly released by the Labor Project for Working Families and the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, Family-Friendly Workplaces.

‘[Do Unions Make a Difference?](#)’ defines a workplace as ‘family friendly’ when it acknowledges its employees’ family responsibilities and creates policies designed to lessen the potentially negative impacts a job may have on employees’ families.

Having generally better working conditions is

part of the reason union members are more likely to achieve a better work-life balance, according to the report. Union members tend to be more aware of their rights and are less likely to fear potential retaliation for requesting leave to care for a family member or taking advantage of flexi-time. The report gives as an example the fact that companies with any unionised employees are almost two times more likely to comply with the US's Family Medical Leave Act than companies without any unionised employees.

WORKPLACE ISSUES

Almost half of employees think their employer is taking advantage of recession

Just under half of employees feel that their employer is actively exploiting the situation created by the economic downturn by cutting pay, reducing hours and laying off workers unnecessarily, reports [The Age and Employment Network](#). According to a survey of 2,900 people for the Keep Britain Working campaign, 52% of people feel positive about their employer's response to the recession, and 23% believe their employer is doing everything possible to help staff through the downturn.

URTU spots employment law loophole

The United Road Transport Union (URTU) has announced its intention to close-up an employment law loophole that allows operators to extend drivers' night shifts without a workforce agreement, according to [Road Transport.com](#).

Currently, a company can request that a driver employed for less than a year complies with its wishes to work more than 10 hours during a night shift, without first getting agreement from staff or a union, according to URTU. However, the union has discovered that this means new employees are not protected from unfair dismissal under the Road Transport (Working Time) Regulations if they refuse or complain. The union is demanding that the government rectifies this by amending existing employment law. URTU national officer Brian Hart says: "We don't suspect the government deliberately

excluded HGV drivers, just that civil servants genuinely hadn't thought about extending it." URTU is now urging members to sign and return a letter calling for an amendment, which it will forward to MPs.

Revenue and customs overtime ban begins

An overtime ban involving 70,000 [Public and Commercial Services Union](#) (PCS) members working for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) took place in July. According to the PCS, the department spends millions on the use of overtime to mask the true impact of job cuts and is calling on HMRC to employ permanent staff to cover the loss of just under 19,000 jobs in the past three years.

In the processing area of HMRC alone, £4.5m or 10% of the area's budget was spent on overtime in the past financial year, according to the union. This is money which PCS argues would be better invested in permanent staff to provide a better service and to chase the £25.8bn of uncollected tax. The continuous overtime ban follows strong support for the action, 70% in a recent ballot.

BA staff reject cost-cutting plan

Ahead of the Annual General Meeting of British Airways in London, [Unite](#) urged the company to reconsider its proposed changes to employment practices. In a letter to BA shareholders, issued at the AGM, the union appealed for the rejection of proposed changes to the company's operations, including the introduction of 'vastly inferior contracts for new starters' and the right to outsource parts of the business to any third party at any time. Unite says that these changes are so profound and divisive that they will seriously damage BA's customer service and its claim to be the world's favourite airline.

Instead, Unite is urging BA's management to embrace worker-backed alternative pay and productivity proposals which deliver major savings running into hundreds of millions of pounds for the airline through a combination of changes to working patterns, voluntary reductions in working time, a pay freeze for all staff and a 2.61 per cent pay cut for the 14,000 cabin crew. Unite has brokered agreement from

the workforce for these significant changes, meaning they could be phased in with the backing of staff in quick time, delivering rapid benefits to the airline.

New report discusses need for work sharing to achieve work-life balance

Work sharing has become the highest national priority in Korea from early this year as a response to the deepening economic crisis, according to a new paper published in the [Monthly Labor Review by the Korea Labor Institute](#).

In an emergency economic meeting at the beginning of the year, the Korean government unveiled its work-sharing support programmes, then announced a labour-management private government agreement to address the economic crisis, led by the Federation of Korean Trade Unions and the Korean Employers' Association. Unlike the 1990s financial crisis, companies in Korea remain cautious about forced restructuring, as more of them are taking part in work-sharing through such methods as wage freezes, partial wage returns, wage cuts and working-hour rearrangements, according to the report.

Workers at Manchester quilt company strike over shift pay squeeze

[Unite members](#) employed at Bedcrest Ltd in Middleton, Manchester, took part in a series of 24 hour strikes throughout August. Unionised workers also undertook a continuous overtime ban from August onwards.

Around 80 workers at the continental quilt and pillow manufacturers, who supply bedding to major supermarkets, including Tesco, took part in the strike because of management's plan to change contracts of employment, according to Unite. The union also stated that workers disagreed with proposals to cut shift premiums by five per cent over two years and holidays by three days.

Unite believes Bedcrest is using the recession to cut costs and is urging the company to work

with the union to find a better way forward.

EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

Australian gender pay gap set to widen following freeze on wages for the low-paid, according to ACTU

The gap between men's and women's pay will widen following the Australian government's decision to freeze the minimum wage, the [Australian Council of Trade Unions](#) has argued. Women are over-represented among the low-paid, and the adverse decision by the Australian Fair Pay Commission will worsen inequality, said ACTU President Sharan Burrow. According to ACTU, a new report by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency has confirmed that women lagged behind men at all levels of employment, including executives. The report, based on the 2008 census of women in leadership, revealed that women executive managers earned nearly 30% less than men working in the same positions, and the gap was wider for support roles.

Unions have recently endorsed a new campaign in Australia to reduce the gender pay gap, calling for workplaces to be required annually to report basic equal pay data. Unions want to see the establishment of a Pay Equity Division and Pay Equity Commissioner within Fair Work Australia, and increased regulatory measures to prevent unequal remuneration.

Government should do more to eradicate gender pay gap

Three years after publishing its first report, the Women and Work Commission has reconvened to examine the progress made on its recommendations. Headway has been made in a number of areas but the government could be doing much more to unlock women's talent, says the report, '[Shaping a Fairer Future: A review of the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission three years on](#)'. Further recommendations from the commission include:

- a national strategy to break down gender stereotypes, particularly among those aged under 14, to be drawn up by the Department

for Children, Schools and Families by March 2010

- a document which sets out clear rules and accountabilities relating to gender equality objectives for the new Skills Funding Agency and the Young Person's Learning Agency, to be put together by the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by March 2010
- a work programme to promote quality part-time and flexible working, to be developed by the Government Equalities Office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by March 2010
- clearer methods for monitoring the impact of government policy on women at national, regional and local levels, along with prescribed steps for involving women and their representative groups in government.

Commenting on the Women and Work Commission report published in July, [TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber](#) said:

“This is a stern wake up call to anyone who thinks the UK is anywhere near ending the gender pay gap. The report rightly recommends that efforts to tackle gender stereotyping should start at school. But it's equally important that we tackle the stereotyping and barriers women face at work as well.

“Women have outperformed men in education for a number of years, yet many still end up in low paid, part-time work once they become mothers. Enabling parents to better balance their childcare responsibilities while continuing in jobs that develop and make full use of their skills would give the UK a huge productivity boost – exactly what is needed to get the economy moving again.”

[Chris Keates, General Secretary of the NASUWT](#) said:

“The commission's report supports the need for independent information and guidance to be available to young people when they are making

subject and career choices. The recommendations that students are offered work experience in non-traditional industries and given a ‘buddy’ to offer mentoring are right and should be taken forward. It is also important that the selection process for apprenticeships challenges gender stereotyping if sexism and the gender pay gap are to be effectively tackled.

“However, the NASUWT has concerns about the recommendation that gender stereotyping becomes part of the Ofsted inspection framework by the end of 2011. The NASUWT is reluctant to add any more to the Ofsted framework, but, in truth, the way to take these issues forward means that they should be made a priority for inspectors. Ofsted already has a remit to inspect schools' performance in tackling discrimination and ensuring equal opportunities, but the NASUWT has serious concerns about the expertise and skills of inspectors in addressing equalities issues.”

[Bronwyn McKenna, UNISON Director of Organising and Membership](#), said:

“How much longer do women have to wait to get what they are legally entitled to – equal pay? It still takes far too long for women to take their legitimate claims for equal pay through the courts. Instead of settling these cases, employers are taking women through a legal minefield that contributes to the gender pay gap and is both complex and costly.

The education system must ensure that it does not stereotype young women into low paid ‘caring roles’. But, at the same time, society needs to re-evaluate the worth attached to those jobs and the essential part they play in creating a more civilised society.”

[Katja Hall, Director of Human Resources Policy, CBI](#), said:

“The WWC's report and recommendations are welcome. The CBI has been saying for some time that a key reason for women earning less than men is their academic choices and careers advice at school. We hope the government takes this report seriously as the choices made in formal

education affect an individual's earning potential throughout their lives. More women should be encouraged to take maths and science subjects, which are very popular with employers. It is a tragedy that schoolchildren make choices based on poor advice and the stereotyping of subjects and careers, rather than their individual talent and aptitude."

New report on social mobility

The [Panel on Fair Access to the Professions](#) has published its final report. Elitism in the professions and a lack of focus on careers in schools mean that bright young people from middle class as well as lower income backgrounds are being shut out from professional jobs, the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn MP, Chair of the Fair Access to the Professions Panel, said.

Responding to the report, [TUC Deputy General Secretary \(and member of the panel\), Frances O'Grady](#), said:

"This report offers some strong prescriptions to cure the British disease of access to professions based on who you know rather than what you know. The panel's proposals should widen access to professional jobs, and ensure true talent rises to the top regardless of class background. A degree followed by required service as an unpaid intern puts a price on entry to the professions that many simply can't afford. The panel's recommendations should allow many more people to access higher education and stop rogue bosses exploiting unpaid interns.

"This report recognises that improving social mobility means giving everyone an equal chance to fulfil their potential, so proposals such as extending the right to request flexible working to all employees over time and opening up new pathways into the professions for those without degrees are also very welcome. Much less welcome are ideas like education credits and the acceleration of the Academy programme. Rather than perpetuating the illusory nature of consumer choice in school education, the government's priority should be to support all our children to access high quality schooling in

their local community."

TUC welcomes decision to bring forward review of default retirement age

Responding to the government's announcement that ministers will bring forward a review of the UK's default retirement age, which currently allows employers to require staff to retire at 65, [TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber](#) said:

"We welcome the early review of the default retirement age. It cannot be right that an employer can sack someone simply for being too old. Employees should have choice – neither forced by employers to give up work, nor forced by inadequate pensions into working longer than they should. A key challenge as we live and stay active longer is developing the right kind of jobs, support and training for older workers."

The impact of a phased retirement programme, new report released

A new report investigating phased retirement as a means of increasing labour supply of people of older active age has been released by the [Institute for the Study of Labor](#). The paper, 'the Impact of a Phased Retirement Program: a Case Study', discusses the effect of an employee reducing their working time, either in the same job or by changing jobs, and staying on in the labour market rather than leaving a full-time job early for full-time retirement.

The paper analyses factors that influence the decision to take up a part-time pension and continue working at the same workplace at reduced hours. The research is based on data from one employer in the public sector in Sweden, Stockholm University. The report finds that the effects on pension wealth of taking a part-time pension, and also individual characteristics such as gender, age, earnings and occupation, are important influencing factors.

New inquiry: women in the City

The Treasury Committee has announced a new inquiry: [Women in the City](#). The committee will take evidence on the role of women in the City, developing themes which have emerged in the

course of its banking crisis inquiry, relating to corporate governance. The evidence will refer to major financial institutions in the UK wherever they are situated.

The committee seeks written evidence on:

- the proportion of women occupying senior positions in major financial institutions and the extent of glass ceilings to promotion
- pay inequalities
- the prevalence of flexible working practices
- the extent to which the culture of the City is sexist
- the prevalence of sexual harassment and exploitation.

Written evidence should be sent to treascom@parliament.uk by 10 September 2009. Oral evidence sessions for the inquiry will begin following the summer recess.

Female CIOs in Canada shatter the glass ceiling?

Female Canadian CIOs earn more than their male peers on average, according to the [CIO Association of Canada's Salary Survey](#).

The survey has found that women in the CIO role are paid on average C\$156,000, compared with an average figure of just under C\$155,000 earned by their male equivalents. When bonuses are considered the gap increases slightly, with women earning C\$189,000 and men C\$186,000. The sample may have been influenced by the numbers of men and women whose pay was considered.

Promoting an older workforce

The increasing age of the UK workforce presents major challenges for government, occupational health services, employers, workers and their families, according to [Economic and Social Research Council](#). The council has announced that it will be carrying out new research into an ageing workforce. The research will address wide-ranging issues associated with later life working and will develop interventions to

promote the health, productivity and quality of working life for older people.

HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Australian unions push for job security, support for families and better workplace rights

Securing jobs, supporting families, protecting workplace rights and sustaining economic growth are at the heart of a new action plan for working Australians launched in July [by the ACTU](#).

The 'Jobs and Rights Charter for Working Australians' was distributed at the Australian Labor Party conference in Sydney and sets out union priorities for inclusion in ALP's policy and beyond.

ACTU President Sharon Burrow said unions would be calling for guidelines on government spending that support domestic jobs and industries, and for action to improve job and income security, including urgent new measures to protect employee entitlements.

Unions will also push for equal laws for construction workers and best possible standards of workplace health and safety, and for tighter corporate regulation, including a fairer tax system, and curbs on excessive executive pay and bonuses.

Relationship between employers and employees crucial for business success

Including employees fully in the future of a company is a crucial step to pursuing innovation and new opportunities, according to the [MacLeod review](#), commissioned to make recommendations on employee engagement. Government support and increased co-operation between UK businesses is needed to make sure that the relationship between employee and employer is at the heart of business plans, said the review. To bring this about, the government should raise awareness of the benefits of, and techniques for employee engagement, along with creating a senior sponsor group to boost understanding of employee engagement, with

representatives from business, the public sector, not-for-profit organisations and unions. A range of practical support should be available by March 2010.

Select Committee recommends tougher sanctions and tighter controls to prevent accidents in the workplace

Board-level commitment to prioritise health and safety at work is still too low, according [a new report](#) by the Work and Pensions Select Committee. The committee welcomes the introduction of new legislation, such as the Health and Safety (Offences) Act 2008, which it hopes will lead to higher fines, where appropriate, for those who breach the law. The report, 'Workplace health and safety: follow-up report', maintains that if voluntary guidance is not working the government should legislate to ensure company directors take ownership of their employees' safety. It adds that it is crucial that the workforce is engaged in ensuring workplace safety. Increasing worker involvement is an investment that will reap its own rewards but to achieve this, the Health and Safety Executive must invest in worker involvement schemes and employees must feel free to report their health and safety concerns, according to the committee.

Employers' attitudes to managing well-being and sickness at work

The [Institute for Employment Studies](#) has conducted a 'snapshot' survey of 42 employers' views on the recession, how they feel about managing sickness and well-being at work, and the new fit note in particular.

When asked whether managing employee well-being had become more or less important to them in the context of the recession, 27 employers said yes, it had become more (or much more) important and 15 stated that things hadn't changed because of the recession, or that well-being had maintained its high priority. No employers stated that employee well-being had become less important.

Employers generally welcomed the new government 'fit note' but with reservations. Out

of those interviewed, 10 were positive about the idea, 21 were open minded but with some concern and 11 saw no benefits to the proposals. Employers who welcomed the fit note appreciated the change of approach and the more positive focus on duties that employees are able to perform, rather than on what they can't. A number of the more positive responses felt that the fit note had the potential to reduce sickness absence. Some of the reservations involved:

- the ability of GPs to manage occupational health issues they are not qualified to assess
- the way fit notes are introduced, and managers' ability to use them successfully
- increasing the workload of employers
- employers' ability to make the recommended accommodations.

According the Institute, the well-being agenda for the coming year will be about reducing the costs of absence.

Making life better for women at work - a South West TUC Women's committee conference

The South West TUC Women's Committee will hold a free event, 'Making Life Better for Women at Work' on 23 October 2009. This conference is aimed at working women, union activists and reps, employers, and agencies and organisations that want to explore how women's working lives can be improved. The event will feature workshops looking at the barriers women face in the workplace and will take a positive approach to helping women look at what works and what tools they can use to achieve equality at work. Guest speakers will include Sarah Veale, from TUC's Equalities and Equal Rights Department and Richard Exell, TUC Economy and Social Affairs Senior Policy Officer. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

The conference will take place from 10am to 3.30pm at the Genesis Centre, SCATT, Taunton. To apply for a place on the conference, [download the flyer from this website](#), and return it to South West TUC before 8 October 2009. For further information please contact Tanya Parker or Jo Rees at South West TUC on 0117 947 0521 or email southwest@tuc.org.uk.