

# Risks

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**HAZARDS  
MAGAZINE**



Editor: [Rory O'Neill](#) of [Hazards](#) magazine. Comments to [Tom Mellish](#)

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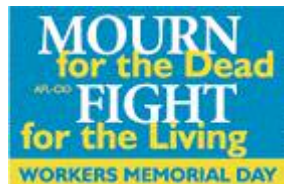
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**Risks** is the TUC's weekly online bulletin for safety reps and others, read each week by over 9,100 subscribers and 1,500 on the TUC website. To receive this bulletin every week, click [here](#). Past issues are

[available](#). This edition contains [Useful links](#) [TUC courses for safety reps](#) [Disclaimer and Privacy statement](#).

## UNION NEWS

### **UNISON prepares for Workers' Memorial Day 2004**



UNISON is stepping up its preparations for Workers' Memorial Day 2004. The annual 28 April event is the day unions and campaigners resolve to "remember the dead, and fight like hell for the living." A UNISON briefing says "forget-me-knot" purple ribbons "will be worn by workers across the world as a symbol of remembrance and solidarity in campaigning against negligent employers who kill, maim, or destroy the health of those they employ." UNISON will be distributing a campaigning poster "on the need for new laws to make employers truly accountable and to give safety reps better rights to ensure that employers are held to account." The briefing provides pointers for Workers' Memorial Day activities and publicity.

- **[UNISON WMD bulletin. Updates on UK activities for Workers' Memorial Day. Workers' Memorial Day worldwide](#) – news and resources. Workers' Memorial Day posters (free) and forget-me-knot ribbons (30p each plus a SAE, 30p each for 2–99 ribbons including p+p, or £25 per 100 including p+p) are available from [Greater Manchester Hazards Centre](#), 23 New Mount Street, Manchester, M4 4DE. Tel: 0161 953 4037.**

### **UCATT issues asbestos epidemic warning**

A union leader has warned the epidemic of the asbestos cancer mesothelioma in Britain will be worse than experts fear if there is any weakening of restrictions on asbestos use. Commenting on the asbestos cancer warning in last week's *British Medical Journal* ([Risks 141](#)), George Brumwell, general secretary of the construction workers' union UCATT and a member of the Health and Safety Commission, warned that some Tory MPs were backing asbestos industry calls to lift some asbestos prohibitions, so "we need to resist calls for a relaxation in the restrictions on the use of asbestos." He added: "If that were to happen the epidemic which the *British Medical Journal* is predicting will

be much worse than that which doctors fear.” He said it crucial the government provides the medical facilities and research needed to care for the victims and to search for a cure. UCATT is pressing for an industry-wide occupational health scheme, he said, adding this could be used to detect and treat mesothelioma.

- [UCATT news release.](#)

### **GMB warns of asbestos “ticking time bomb”**



Government funding is necessary to help schools, hospitals and local authorities identify and deal with asbestos in public buildings, a top union leader has warned. GMB general secretary Kevin Curran told a conference of his union’s safety reps there is an “asbestos ticking time bomb” that could threaten public health unless the government acts. From 1 May 2004 all owners of non-domestic premises, including local authorities and NHS Trusts, will have a duty to identify and manage the asbestos in their buildings. GMB says asbestos in poor condition may have to be removed, and work liable to expose people to any asbestos that remains in place will need to be strictly controlled. “Unless government funds are provided to ensure that the new regulations are fully implemented, thousands of lives could remain at risk,” said Curran. GMB is encouraging its safety representatives and public sector employers to develop asbestos management programmes. “No longer should an electrician be drilling into a wall in a school or hospital, not knowing whether he and others will be exposed to deadly asbestos fibres or not,” he said.

- [GMB news release.](#) [HSE duty to management asbestos campaign page.](#)

### **Euro union boss urges UK to avoid hours court action**



The head of Europe’s union umbrella group has urged the government to avoid court proceedings and drop the UK opt-out from the 48-hour working week ceiling. John Monks, general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), said: “We fully support those in the European Parliament who voted a few days ago to bring the British government to court for misapplying the Working Time Directive ([Risks 141](#)). I hope that the British government will reconsider its position and settle this matter without

any need for legal proceedings." Speaking at a 30 January conference on safety and European enlargement, organised jointly by ETUC and its safety research arm TUTB, he said the accession countries have made tremendous efforts to incorporate the existing body of community law, but added there is still work to be done. Transition periods should be reduced to a minimum, particularly on occupational health and safety measures, Monks said.

- [ETUC news release. Conference background materials.](#)
- [TUC It's about time! campaign to end the UK's working time out-out.](#)

### **Long hours culture takes its toll on UK drivers**

Excessive hours are having a damaging effect on the family and social lives of most UK lorry drivers, with one in four drivers currently working more than 60 hours per week, according to union research. Retail and distribution union Usdaw is urging transport company bosses to start negotiating with unions and workers now, ahead of the introduction of an EU directive in March 2005. This will limit the working week of drivers to a maximum of 48 hours. Usdaw says its research, one of the most comprehensive trade union surveys of its kind, found: 72 per cent of lorry drivers believe working long hours has damaged their family and social lives; almost six in 10 said long hours have damaged their health; almost half work 55 or more hours per week; and one in four work 60 or more hours per week. The union says its campaign has been boosted by two groundbreaking agreements that will deliver shorter hours and higher pay to members ([Risks 141](#) and [Risks 134](#)). Usdaw says these will be used as blueprints to secure more agreements that benefit both employees and employers.

- [Ushaw news release.](#)

## **OTHER NEWS**

### **Official safety alert over rail job cuts**

The Railway Inspectorate has delivered a strong rebuke to Network Rail for failing to carry out an adequate safety assessment when it shed 600 managers.

In a letter to Network Rail's deputy chief executive, Iain Coucher, the government watchdog expressed concern about the departure of 60 staff in safety critical roles. The Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) claims many employees have been left unacceptably overworked. Principal inspector John Gillespie has asked Network Rail to carry out an immediate review of the safety implications of the cuts. His letter says: "We are concerned that Network Rail did not follow your own change management procedure as set out in your railway safety case." The letter asks for Network Rail to respond by 26 February 2004, and adds: "Information on when we can expect the results of the risk assessment and your work on your stress policy would be helpful." John Munday, TSSA negotiations officer, said: "This report proves TSSA was right to complain about the arbitrary way Network Rail set about cutting staff numbers. It is very worrying that Network Rail does not seem to understand their safety responsibilities when they are about to undergo the biggest organisational change since privatisation."

- [TSSA news release](#). **HSE letter and report in full [pdf format]**. [The Guardian](#).

### **Booze fuels attacks on staff**

At least 376,000 people suffered violence at work last year, according to official figures. Latest British Crime Survey statistics show in a third of incidents of violence at work, victims said that the offender was under the influence of alcohol. The report shows workers on the frontline such as health care staff and police officers were most at risk of violence at work. Home Office minister Hazel Blears said she was "very encouraged" the number of people experiencing violence at work has fallen by 27 per cent since 1999, but added: "The government can provide funding and guidelines to companies but this alone cannot combat violence in the workplace. Employers have a responsibility to ensure that their staff are trained to deal with workplace violence and offer support and advice to employees who have been victims of crime and ensure that violence at work is dealt with effectively." Retail union Usdaw expressed concern at the BCS's finding that two-thirds of British workers whose job involves contact with the public have not received any form of training in how to deal with violent or threatening behaviour.

- [Home Office news release](#). **Full BCS report, Violence at Work: Findings from the 2002/2003 [pdf**

[format](#)]. [Ananova](#). [Usdaw news release](#).

### **BNFL fined over dive accident**

British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL) has been fined £30,000 plus £20,783 costs after an incident where a Sellafield diver nearly drowned. Peter Whelan was trapped under a boat for almost half an hour in treacherous seas. The company was fined at Carlisle Crown Court after pleading guilty to failing to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of Mr Whelan, a member of the plant's 10-strong diving team. Simon Parrington, prosecuting for the Health and Safety Executive, said the firm's failure to carry out an adequate risk assessment had resulted in a life-threatening situation. Mr Whelan had dived down to the seabed from the moving boat when his umbilical breathing tube was sucked into the boat's power intake and tangled around the drive shaft. He switched to his emergency air supply but it was more than 25 minutes before he was finally cut free by the boat's skipper. BNFL was criticised for using a technique called live-boating, where the boat is moving while the diver is underwater. Although not illegal, HSE guidelines advise against the practice. Simon Hilton, representing BNFL, said the company was unaware that live-boating was considered unacceptable.

- [HSE news release](#). [News & Star](#).

### **Environment Agency fined after worker drowns**

The government's environmental watchdog has been ordered to pay £170,000 in fines and costs following the death of a worker. Steven Hughes drowned in the River Witham in Lincoln in September 2001 after his dumper truck plunged into the river. The father-of-two had been moving earth from a low bank to build up flood defences when his truck overturned into the water. Lincoln Crown Court was told how Mr Hughes, who had not received training on a front loading vehicle from the Environment Agency, had also not seen a health and safety risk assessment - which highlighted the risk of overturning and the danger of drowning. Following the hearing, HSE inspector Samantha Peace said: "It was a loss of life that could have been prevented. We would have expected the work to have been very carefully planned with safe routes, turning and passing points. Instead those workers had to make those sorts of decisions themselves on the hoof." Sentencing, Judge Michael Heath said: "There was a series of fallings in the planning and execution of this work. The safety precautions

taken fell significantly short of the standard required." The Environment Agency is a government body, so the £150,000 fine will go to the Treasury's central fund.

- [HSE news release. Lincolnshire Echo.](#)

### **Bad deal for minorities and disabled in the NHS**

NHS staff in London who are sick or who have disabilities are more likely to face harassment and discrimination - from colleagues and patients alike - than other staff, according to a new survey. The Institute for Employment Studies report says staff with a disability or medical condition are less satisfied with the quality of their working lives and are more likely to experience an accident or injury or to be harassed or subject to violent attack. The survey also found respondents in all minority ethnic groups - making up a quarter of the survey - were more likely than white respondents to say they had experienced harassment or violence at work.

- [IES news release. Healthy attitudes: Quality of working life in the London NHS, 2000-2002, IES Report 404. ISBN 1 85184 335 3, £35.00. Order online.](#)[UNISON news release.](#)

## INTERNATIONAL

### **Australia: Log truckers working 100 hour weeks**

Global pressures on the timber industry are forcing log truck drivers in Tasmania to spend up to 100 hours a week behind the wheel. The growing pressure has sparked a new campaign from the Transport Workers Union (TWU), which is pushing for legal rates, legal loads and legal working conditions. TWU branch secretary Bill Noonan said: "It becomes a race to the bottom, and some are receiving the same rates they were two to three years ago, which isn't good economics." Last year, out of 80 heavy vehicle accidents in Tasmania, 65 were in daylight hours and most of those were on straight, dry roads. Mr Noonan said that pointed to a problem with fatigue and, with a higher concentration of log trucks in Tasmania, it was a serious concern.

- [The Mercury.](#)

### **Canada: Horror stories of x-ray techs**

Most x-ray technologists suffer from “significant and diverse musculoskeletal” problems due to the physical stress and strain of their job, according to a study published this month in the *International Journal of Industrial Ergonomics*. Dr Shrawan Kumar, a professor of physical therapy at the University of Alberta, found that 83 per cent of the x-ray technologists examined suffered from regular backaches, while 39 per cent of the female sample had regular neck pain. He believes the pain is due to excessive task demands - heavy lifting during manipulation of patients and equipment. “I was horrified to see the kind of physical stress x-ray technologists go through,” Kumar said. “They have the same physical stress level that heavy labourers have, but most heavy labour is intermittent work, and x-ray technologists work constantly.” Kumar said some of the work required by the technologists exceeds the permissible spinal load limits outlined by the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety. It is uncommon to find x-ray technologists beyond the age of 50, he said.

- [Eureka Alert](#).

### **Europe: Chemicals crackdown will save thousands of lives**

Thousands of lives could be saved in the European Union each year with better handling of dangerous chemicals, the European Commission has said. “We know that badly managed chemicals can cause cancer, respiratory problems... and we don't know the risks to which we are exposed,” said Catherine Day, director-general of the Commission's environment department. “There's very little data on how many deaths or illnesses can be prevented. But the Commission estimates we could save 4,500 lives a year in the EU by using chemicals in a safer way.” If ministers agree, the plan - known as REACH, launched in October ([Risks 132](#)) - would close a loophole that requires only new chemicals to undergo rigorous testing. UK unions have given the proposals a qualified welcome, but warn that for all the talk of greater openness, unions and workers in the industry have been given no say in the process.

- [Environmental News Network](#). [HSE background document on REACH](#).
- **For more on chemical safety policy, see the [European Union chemicals webpage](#). Also see the [Chemicals Policy Initiative](#) and the [Chemical Reaction](#) websites.**

## **Global: Tech firms promise action on exploitation**

A report into working conditions in microelectronics plants in developing countries has given the technology industry a “wake-up call,” according to Dell. Development agency CAFOLD last week said microelectronics industry workers in the developing world, producing computer parts for use by top multinationals including Dell, Hewlett Packard and IBM, are facing exploitation and “dire” working conditions ([Risks 141](#)). The charity is urging the companies to take more responsibility for the workers producing their products and says they should ensure their contractors adhere to UN-approved codes of conduct and core ILO labour standards. Dell said the report had raised some serious issues which it would be looking in to, adding it had already taken steps to ensure its global suppliers understand the company's core principles. The CAFOD report found many workers in Taiwan-owned factories lacked basic health and safety protection in their workplace. Monina Wong, who led the research in China, said solvents were being handled without proper precautions, and workers were working 12 to 16 hours a day, many testing monitors for 10 hours at a stretch, with no rest breaks.

- [BBC News Online](#).
- **Related information:** [International Campaign for Responsible Technology](#).

## **South Africa: Unions slam AngloGold over miners' deaths**

South African unions have lashed out at AngloGold after a spate of deaths in the company's mines. Union federation COSATU and mining union NUM spoke out following the death of two miners at TauTona mine near Carletonville this week. Less than a week before, two miners were killed at AngloGold's neighbouring Mponeng mine. In January, three miners died and five were injured after a rockburst at another AngloGold mine in the area. The union organisations are demanding AngloGold and government safety inspectors work with unions on an urgent investigation to establish the cause of the accidents and take all measures necessary to ensure there is no repetition. NUM spokesperson Moferefere Lekorotsoana said: “The manner in which this company is having accidents in the Carletonville area alone, within such a short term, gives us the impression that they believe they have the right to kill and maim mineworkers, then hide behind press statement clichés of the company will hold a full

investigation into the cause of the accident." COSATU spokesperson Patrick Craven said the federation fully supported NUM in its condemnation of AngloGold.

- [COSATU news release. Mail & Guardian.](#)

### **USA: "Bankrupt" asbestos firms flourish in US**

Claims that asbestos trade in the US is dying off and compensation claims are taking the industry with it appear to be unfounded. Latest US Commerce Department figures show that US asbestos imports have climbed by 300 per cent over the last decade. And when the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* Pulitzer prize winning reporter Andrew Schneider examined Securities and Exchange Commission filings and press releases from the five largest asbestos targets who have filed for bankruptcy, he found most were doing rather well. The most recent reports from Armstrong, WR Grace, Federal Mogul, Owens Corning and US Gypsum show that with a single exception, all have increased sales and have the same or a greater number of employees than before they filed for protective bankruptcy, termed a "Chapter 11" filing in US business parlance. The supposed plight of these companies, however, has been the justification for strong pressure for new laws which could soon create a cash-limited compensation pot, a move personal injury lawyers say would save the companies billions. The US manoeuvres are already hurting UK workers – Federal Mogul owns UK company Turner and Newall, which has frozen payouts to thousands of dying UK asbestos victims ([Risks 132](#)).

- [St Louis Post-Dispatch. Confined Space.](#)

### **USA: Couple awarded \$6 million in asbestos case**

A US couple has been awarded \$6 million (£3.27m) compensation in an asbestos lawsuit against a Minnesota company. An Allegheny County jury found that William Lisac, 62, of Shaler, was exposed to asbestos when he worked with valves produced by DeZurik Inc. Lisac was a steamfitter for more than 40 years and worked with the valves, which are used by power plants, chemical plants and steel mills. He was diagnosed with lung cancer last year. A jury deliberated about four hours before deciding Lisac and his wife, Lois, deserved \$3 million each. William Lisac said he'd gladly trade the money he had been awarded to be cured.

- [Greensburg Tribune-Review. Star-Tribune.](#)

## RESOURCES



### **New resources for RSI Day, 29 February 2004**

Planning a local event for International RSI Awareness Day, 29 February 2004? Well, make sure you tell everybody about it! You can print-off-and-use a free RSI Day events poster from the *Hazards* website – just fill in details of your activity. You'll also find links to other useful resources on the magazine's campaigning webpages. RSI Day "is when unions, safety reps and safety campaigners highlight the terrible strain injuries toll."

- [Hazards RSI Day poster and resources.](#)

### **European Working Conditions Observatory**

The Dublin-based European Foundation has created an online European Working Conditions Observatory, pulling together information on measures to: maintain health and well-being of workers; ensure career and employment security; develop skills and competences; and reconcile work-life balance. It says: "In the debate on the future world of work, it is important to analyse the trends and challenges, and the measures required to build a sustainable European working model." The workplace safety section includes information on absenteeism, stress, violence and racism at work, workplace health, aging and work and physical work risk factors.

- [European Working Conditions Observatory including workplace safety section.](#)

## EVENTS AND COURSES

### **Work your proper hours day, 27 February 2004**



Friday 27 Feb 2004 - [www.workSMART.org.uk](http://www.workSMART.org.uk)

If you do regular unpaid overtime, then exercise your right to work only your contractual hours, and remind your boss just how much modern workplaces depend on unpaid overtime. On 27 February 2004, the TUC's first

national "Work your proper hours" day, take a proper lunch break, not just a sandwich at your desk, and leave on time, to enjoy your own time on Friday evening. Why not get together with friends working nearby, and go for a coffee, a pint, or take in a show? You deserve it! This is one day in the year for your boss to appreciate your efforts, and for you to appreciate yourself.

- [workSMART webpage](#). [TUC's "It's about time!" working hours campaign](#).

### **TUC courses for safety reps**

#### **COURSES FOR January to March 2004**

[South West](#), [Wales](#) [Scotland](#) [Southern and Eastern](#) [East and West Midlands](#) [Northern Yorkshire and Humberside](#)

### USEFUL LINKS

**Visit** the TUC [http://www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/](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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**What's new** in the [HSC/E](#) and the [European Agency](#).

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