Union safety reps save economy millions every year

The UK’s network of 100,000 trade union health and safety reps not only help reduce injuries and ill-health at work, but save the economy many millions of pounds, according to a new TUC report published last week.

The report is published during the TUC’s Heartunions week which started on Monday (8 February) and ran until Sunday to showcase the contribution unions make to workplaces and communities.

*The Union Effect: How unions make a difference on health and safety* reveals that health and safety reps:

* **Help reduce injuries at work and ill-health caused by your job:** workplaces which have a union presence have a 24% lower rate of injuries than non-unionised workplaces. A 2013 campaign in Weetabix to increase union involvement in health and safety led to more than 30% reduction in all work-related injuries across all sites in the first 12 months.
* **Encourage greater reporting of injuries and awareness of risks:** workers with a health and safety committee are more than twice as likely to have been given health and safety training in the previous year than workers without one.
* **Help develop a positive safety culture in organisations:** where staff have safety reps they have a voice and are more willing to raise issues. Unions also help make their members more aware of safety issues in the workplace.
* **Save the economy many millions of pounds:** it is estimated that safety reps save society more than £181m by cutting down on the time lost from workplace injuries, and save more than 286,000 days that would have been lost to work-related illness.

Each year the TUC trains around 10,000 safety reps, and many more are trained through their unions. These reps focus on finding hazards in the workplace as well as taking concerns from individuals. Union reps first highlighted risks such as the dangers of asbestos, violence at work, RSI, the effects of passive smoking and stress.

Despite the difference that union health and safety reps make in the workplace the government’s trade union bill will cap the time that all union reps in the public sector – including health and safety reps – are allowed to help protect and support members. The bill will also make it harder for unions to strike on health and safety issues, and will allow employers to use agency workers to break strikes, which the TUC fears will put other workers but the wider general public at risk.

Union health and safety reps play a huge role in protecting people at work and save the economy millions.

Good employers recognise the importance of working with unions to ensure their shops, offices and factories are safe. It’s a shame the government is putting this good work at risk with its ill-conceived trade union bill.

Beth Farhat

Northern TUC Regional Secretary