

# **The Future of Health and Safety and Well Being at Work**

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**Thank you for inviting me to speak here today.**

**It is an honour to be giving a keynote speech on such an important issue.**

**When it comes to health and safety UCATT is in the front line.**

**Construction remains the most dangerous industry in the UK and our workers are highly vulnerable to occupational diseases.**

**For example construction maintenance workers are now the group most at risk of being exposed to asbestos.**

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**With 98% of all construction deaths being as a result of occupational disease.**

**There still remains a great deal of focus on fatal accidents.**

**The good news is that in recent years we have seen a decline with a record low number of fatalities being recorded.**

**This is despite the industry beginning to recover from recession, which previously has always resulted in an increase in deaths.**

**It is very much hoped that this trend continues.**

**But we must also remember that an average of 40 deaths in construction every year is far too many and for every fatal accident there are many more major accidents, resulting in the victim never working in the industry again.**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**At UCATT we remain concerned that key messages are not being learned about vulnerable workers.**

**Information is needed to force the industry to take appropriate action.**

**And this is certainly no criticism of the HSE inspectors who do a fantastic job, given their lack of resources and in the teeth of a hostile and prejudiced media.**

**No, it is a corporate failing.**

Recently UCATT did some digging and found out that last year the highest number of construction fatal accidents were in London.

There were 7 deaths of these 5 were suffered by migrant workers.

A figure that is impossible to get from the HSE as they do not record nationality.

Yet I am assured that it is one of the first questions that inspectors are trained to ask when undertaking a fatal accident investigation.

How on earth can we ask the difficult questions and make changes to safety procedures if we are not supplied with the relevant information?

UCATT has long argued that for many reasons migrant workers are at greater risk of injury or death.

This is due to a whole host of factors:

- language,
- training,
- understanding of safety systems
- what types of jobs they work on.

This is just one example of where we could and should be taking further action on making our industry safer.

I am also concerned that as deaths have fallen complacency will set in.

Industry will believe they have cracked the problem

The desire to further cut deaths and injuries on sites, large and small will begin to stall

But let us be clear

Any let up in the push for safe working, will invariably result in an increase in accidents.

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My task today is also to focus on well-being which should be an equal priority.

Once again the facts are highly disturbing.

Construction accounts for less than 10 per cent of the UK workforce but accounts for over 56% of male occupational cancers.

And overall it is the case that only 40% of workers are able to continue to work in their trade over the age of 60.

**Put simply the industry is both poisoning its workers and flogging them so hard that their bodies literally begin to crumble.**

**Is it any wonder these figures are so grim when in the private sector, virtually no worker has access to an effective occupational health system.**

**At a time when the industry is increasingly suffering from skills shortages, we should be cherishing our experienced workers, maximising their time in the industry and ensuring they pass on, their skills to tomorrow's workforce.**

**Instead the industry chews them up and dumps them.**

**This culture of not looking after the workforce and failing to ensure their long-term health, requires massive culture change.**

**Construction doesn't have permanent sites or a permanent workforce.**

**Companies hire and fire workers for each job, so healthy employment relationships and a duty of care don't develop.**

**Therefore, if we are to tackle the evils of:**

- **Occupational disease**
- **The development of long term injuries**
- **Forced early retirement of workers.**

**Then it is going to have to be compulsory for workers to be part of a national occupational health scheme.**

**A scheme that offers genuine assistance in ensuring workers can operate in the industry for as long as possible.**

**Or at least as long as they want to.**

**Rather than a bosses health monitoring scheme which is designed to flag up any potential health problems a worker has, which then prevents them from getting future employment.**

**Such an occupational health scheme must be made available to all workers. Including sub-contractors, agencies and the falsely self-employed.**

**And not just, offered to the tiny number of construction workers directly employed by a major contractor.**

**The construction industry is going to have to be dragged kicking and screaming to adopt such a system.**

**The pressure is going to need to be placed on clients and the public sector to ensure that there is effective occupational health on their sites.**

**We have already developed these commitments on the Hinkley Point development.**

**Where an agreement for an excellent occupational health scheme has been signed with EDF, the client**

**Allied to developing occupational health we also need to be tackling occupational diseases.**

**Once again real movement will have to be led by the trade unions.**

**This Government is not interested in new regulations or even upholding the existing regulations.**

**For UCATT the two major priorities are the biggest killers: asbestos and silicosis, yes these are the two biggest killers.**

**To tackle these problems we must provide better education for our members on both priorities in terms of awareness**

**But more critically providing the knowledge and confidence to ensure they do not place themselves in danger.**

**And lets us be clear in an industry without employment rights and where the curse of blacklisting still hangs over those who raise safety, that is a sizeable challenge.**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Finally returning to safety.**

**Where do I see the future?**

**Well we know what the Conservative agenda is, deregulation and anything goes.**

**We have already experienced RIDDOR being watered down, the scrapping of vital regulations and the barring of inspections from many sectors.**

**We have seen the HSE's budget cut by over 35%.**

**We remain disappointed with its leadership's primary concern being to appease government demands.**

**And I fear that when things become tougher for the Government politically it is an area they will return to.**

**It is a free hit for them with their Right-wing friends in the media.**

**If and when that does occur we need to be tougher and our message needs to be clearer. Let us show the examples of people who have been protected.**

**And those who have died due to a lack of protection.**

**Then let's challenge them.**

**Do you really want to cut laws that save people's lives?**

**So in summary while the goals may have changed in safety and welfare.**

**I believe the same facts remain today as they did in the past.**

**The only people who are going to ensure that workers are safe are the workers themselves.**

**I feel privileged at being asked to address you here today.**

**You are the workers representatives who will be directly leading the challenge and defence of all of our trade union members where it really matters, in the workplace.**

**Thank you for listening.**