



TUC

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of work for good

Safety reps @40

CELEBRATING MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Trade union safety reps – the key to a safe and healthy workplace

The most effective tool that we have in ensuring good health and safety at work is trade unions, because organised workplaces are safer workplaces.

Union health and safety representatives and joint safety committees have been around for 40 years and in that time have made a huge difference.

We now have around 100,000 trade union safety representatives and the work that they do:

- helps reduce injuries at work
- leads to reductions in the levels of ill health caused by work
- encourages greater reporting of injuries and near-misses
- makes workers more confident
- helps develop a more positive safety culture in the organisation
- saves the economy many millions of pounds.



The difference unions make

There is a wealth of evidence of the benefits of trade unions to health and safety. Employers with trade union health and safety committees have half the injury rate of employers who manage safety without unions or joint arrangements. Another study showed that where there is a union presence the workplace injury rate is 24 per cent lower than where there is no union presence. Fatalities are also lower in unionised workplaces.

But it is not only injuries that trade unions help reduce: they also reduce ill health. Another study found that “the proportion of employees who are trade union members has a positive and significant association on both injury and illness rates”.



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The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has said:

“ There is strong evidence that unionised workplaces and those with health and safety representatives are safer and healthier as a result. ”

In 2016, a study of government statistics calculated the savings delivered by unions across the economy and showed that the union role in prevention of workplace injuries and work-related ill health contributed to savings of £219m to £725m a year.

So how does it happen?

We are trained

One of the reasons unions make such a difference is that they ensure their safety representatives are trained. Every year the TUC trains around 10,000 safety representatives, and many more receive training through their unions.

One survey for the HSE into the chemical regulations (COSHH) found that safety representatives were far more knowledgeable than their managers. Ninety per cent of safety representatives were aware of the key principles of the main chemical safety regulations: over a third of managers had not even heard of the regulations. The survey also found that over 80 per cent of safety representatives had received training in health and safety in the last two years, compared to 44 per cent of managers.

We know the workplace

Safety representatives also know the workplace far better than management as they are aware of what really goes on. In addition, they act as a channel for individual workers to raise their concerns. An HSE research paper concluded that "health and safety committee representatives provide a diverse channel for reporting events and hazards". It added: "Union backing, even if it is just knowledge that additional support is available if required, is invaluable."

Unions are often aware of risks long before management. Many risks were first identified by unions, sometimes after management ignored or hid early warnings. It was unions that highlighted the dangers of asbestos, which we now know kills over 5,000 people a year, and they campaigned for a ban many years before the government introduced one. Unions were the first to raise major concerns over levels of violence in the workplace, RSI and the effects of passive smoking. When unions first raised the issue of stress, employers and the media argued that it was nonsense. It is now recognised that workplace stress affects around half a million people at any one time.

We give you a voice at work

Where workers have safety representatives and safety committees they know that they have a voice. That makes them more willing to raise issues. Unions also help make their members more aware of safety issues in the workplace.

However, involving workers directly but without union representation is far less likely to be successful. Research conducted in 2010 for both the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) and the HSE found that worker involvement in non-unionised workplaces was more likely to follow the employer's agenda, while unionised safety representatives were more likely to be empowered to set an agenda and be challenging.



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We need unions today as much as ever

At a time when health and safety is under attack by politicians who see good regulation as 'red tape', by employers who ride roughshod over the laws, and by a big fall in inspections and enforcement, we need trade unions more than ever before.

The only employers who fear us are those who want to cut corners and take risks with our lives. Good employers are already working with unions: we need the rest to start recognising the benefits that unions can bring. We also need government to stop attacking unions and instead do more to ensure that employers are consulting with unions so that everyone can have the benefits that unions bring.

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