

Safety rep

Three in five safety reps say stress is top concern

Stress and musculoskeletal disorders top the list of workers' safety concerns in the TUC's 2008 survey of safety reps.

Three in five (60%) safety reps said stress or overwork was a concern in their workplace, according to the survey carried out by the Labour Research Department for the TUC.

Concerns about stress are most common in the public sector, with the highest instances found in central government (81%), education (74%) and the health services (69%).

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said "stress is likely to increase" as the economic crisis creates more anxiety about job security.

Injuries and illnesses resulting from the poor use of display screen equipment (DSE) are the second most common concern, highlighted by two in five (41%) safety reps – up from



Job worries in the economic crisis will only add to workers' stress levels

fourth place in the previous survey in 2006. Repetitive strain injuries or RSI (40%) are another commonly reported hazard.

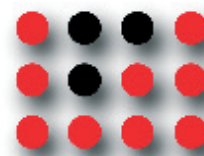
Other concerns on the increase since the last survey include slips, trips and falls (up 6%), violence and abuse at work (up 4%), and lone working (up 3%).

"Simple office hazards, such as spending too much time fixed on a computer screen or sitting on a badly designed chair, are often overlooked by employers," Barber said. "But the survey

shows that they are actually a huge concern to workers and need to be addressed."

The report recommends that unions step up campaigning on stress. There should be more use of enforcement measures by inspectors and the stress management standards should be incorporated into an Approved Code of Practice.

It also suggests a union campaign on DSE, with an emphasis on workstation assessments, as well as taking frequent and regular breaks away from the desk.



A Labour Research Department Publication

No. 108

December 2008

2

◆ Stress in teaching
NHS violence
Law on pleural plaques

3

◆ Rise in recent
firefighter deaths
◆ Shopworkers suffer
assaults and abuse
◆ Lobby on asbestos
◆ News in brief

4

◆ HSE monitor – news
from the Health and
Safety Executive

Safety rep is published monthly by LRD Publications Ltd, 78 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HF.

For details of LRD services:

tel: 020 7928 3649

fax: 020 7928 0621

e-mail: info@lrd.org.uk

website: www.lrd.org.uk

Printed by RAP Spiderweb Ltd, Clowes Street, Hollinwood, Oldham OL9 7LY

HSE investigations show a fall

Investigations by the Health and Safety Executive have fallen by almost half over the last five years, according to research for the Unite general union.

Between 2001-02 and 2006-07 investigations into major injuries to workers declined by 43%. And in 2006-07, the last year

where figures were available, fewer than 11% of major injuries reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) were investigated by them.

The research by the Centre for Corporate Accountability also revealed a 69% reduction in the number of workers off work "over-three day"

injuries investigated over the same five-year period.

There were significant variations in investigation levels between sectors. In 2006-07, around a quarter of incidents in the agricultural sector were investigated, compared to one in seven in construction and only one in 20 in the service sector.

LRD's latest health and safety guides

Health and safety law	£11.00
Working time	£5.60
The environment	£4.90
Tackling asbestos at work	£4.90
Safety, health & equality	£5.10
Tackling violence at work	£4.45
Safety reps in action	£5.70
Stress at work	£4.70
Pain at work	£4.50
Hazardous substances	£4.25
Rehabilitation	£3.15

Union wants NHS to act on violence

NHS workers have been punched, kicked, spat at and had knives pulled on them, as assaults have increased again over the last year.

Almost 56,000 NHS staff in England were physically assaulted in 2007-08, according to figures from the NHS Security Management Services.

UNISON public services union called for tough action to cut down on violence. Karen Jennings, the union's head of health, said: "The catalogue of assaults is shameful. Many of these assaults are preventable."

She called on the NHS to bring in measures to protect staff, such as more security staff working in accident and emergency departments, as well as more CCTV and alarms, and "flagging up dangerous areas or building safety features into hospitals and wards".

Scots get law on pleural plaques

Plans by the Scottish government to compensate workers suffering from asbestos-related conditions, such as pleural plaques, have been welcomed by unions.

The *Damages (Asbestos-Related Conditions) (Scotland) Bill* was passed by the Scottish Parliament last month. The law, expected to come into force next year, will overturn a House of Lords ruling, which has stripped pleural plaque sufferers of compensation.

However, the law will only apply in Scotland. Unions want a law that applies across all of the UK. John McClean, safety officer of the GMB general union, told the government to "stop pussyfooting around" and "ensure that the compensation is as simple and straight forward as possible".

Stress is a class issue for teachers in schools

Stress at work remains a persistent problem for all workers. Safety rep looks at new research which identifies the scale of the problem in teaching.

Teachers have the best mental health at the start of their working life, and the worst by the end of it, Canadian researcher Karen Messing told this year's Hazards conference.

A new study reinforces Messing's observation. Doru Athinodoru, health and safety officer at the ATL education union, has conducted research on stress in the workplace, with particular reference to schools (see box).

First, the research exposes the claims of the "stress sceptics", such as management and academics, who think stress is part of the job and see it as a positive aspect of work.

Athinodoru identifies "stressors" as environmental factors found at work that can stimulate "strain" in an individual, resulting in varying symptoms of ill health. The study underlines the fact that a number of identifiable, organisational stressors exist in the workplace. These include workloads, isolation, lack of support, lack of control and lack of autonomy, which ultimately cause stress.

The study questions the effectiveness of the HSE stress management standards, launched in 2004. This voluntary guidance has been implemented with a measure of success in some workplaces, but many of the worst employers ignore it.

The HSE scarcely enforces the duty of care, despite its own studies which show there are at least half a

million sufferers and despite the high profile court cases identifying stress as a cause of ill health. The research identified just three enforcement notices relating to stress in the last five years.

Finally, the research examines court cases involving stress, and from the testimony of solicitors argues that winning a case on stress is extremely difficult.

Athinodoru found that to win a stress case, claimants have to overcome four hurdles: proving their employer breached their duty of care; establishing that stress led to an "identifiable psychiatric injury"; establishing that the work caused the illness; and that the employer could have foreseen the ill health caused by stress and did nothing to prevent it. Because of these hurdles, claimants seeking redress for personal injury caused by stress "only have a 1% success rate".

The study provides a comparison between public and private sector teachers.

In the state sector, teachers are well unionised and have won agreements on workload, and on planning and preparation time.

However they lack control over the curriculum, have testing imposed and face the stress of Ofsted inspections. They face a degree of surveillance and monitoring unthinkable in many other jobs, coupled with management bullying, large classes and disruptive pupils.

In the private sector, conditions are different but important issues stand out. There is lower union density and less government regulation, employers can get away with imposing longer hours and often lower pay. Teachers are also under pressure from managers and parents for students to achieve the top exam grades.

Athinodoru told *Safety rep*: "This research has shown that teaching is a stressful profession and that teachers working within the state sector suffer more individual stressors than those in the independent sector."

The ATL will be running stress workshops for safety reps, to give them an understanding of the law and the role of union action.

"Collective action remains unions' best course of action," he said.

Stress may bring career change

UK teachers suffer greater levels of stress than in other European countries and recent research for the NUT teachers' union found that working hours are 56 hours a week — well above the working time limit.

The ATL union surveyed 600 teachers, across both state and private schools.

The research found that just over half (51%) of teachers in the state sector felt stressed, just ahead of teachers in the private sector (50%).

Over two-thirds of teachers in the state sector said their health had suffered because of their work, compared with 60% in the private sector.

Half of all teachers surveyed — state and private — said they have considered changing jobs due to stress.

Safety failures have led to a rise in firefighters' deaths

There has been a recent sharp increase in firefighter deaths, a shocking report by the FBU firefighters' union has found.

The report, *In the line of duty*, by the Labour Research Department, found that eight firefighters died on duty in 2007 alone, the worst year since 1985.

In the five years since 2003, at least 22 firefighters have died while on duty, significantly more than in the previous five years.

And more firefighters are being killed while actually attending fires. From February 1996 until October 2002 there were no recorded fire deaths in the UK. However in the last five

years, at least 13 firefighters have been killed at fires.

"The figures have shocked even me", said FBU general secretary Matt Wrack. "I knew firefighter deaths were increasing, but I am horrified at the rate by which they are increasing. And there is no comprehensive, consistent, UK-wide system for recording firefighter deaths."

The research identified a number of organisational failures, using investigation reports and previously unpublished government audits. Nationally, there is a policy vacuum, reflecting a neglect of up-to-date central guidance on firefighter safety. Some local integrated

risk management plans and risk assessments were so bad as to have compromised firefighter safety.

Training for emergency response is insufficient. There is not enough time spent on realistic "hot fire" training, and not enough specialist training in areas, such as breathing apparatus and building construction, the report found.

Wrack said: "These causes of firefighter deaths can all be changed, if the government really wants to change them."

A lobby of Parliament on 12 November by 1,000 firefighters called on MPs to act on the report's recommendations.

Rail management is to blame for Grayrigg crash

Management failures contributed to a train crash in Grayrigg, Cumbria that left a person dead and scores injured, a Rail Accident Investigation Branch report has found.

Its report, published in October into the incident at Grayrigg in 2007, found that rail infrastructure company Network Rail incorrectly set up points that failed and were the ultimate cause of the derailment.

Bob Crow, RMT rail union general secretary, said that Network Rail's attempt "to point the finger of blame at individuals it managed so poorly was outrageous".

Demand for more protection against asbestos exposure

Unions have called for greater efforts to protect workers from asbestos, as the extent of exposure and the number of cases continues to grow.

Construction union UCATT said asbestos could be killing up to 10,000 people a year against the official HSE estimates of 4,000 a year.

The ATL teachers' union said that over 400 members had contacted them about their exposure to asbestos at work.

CWU wins better footwear in post

Unions in Royal Mail have negotiated better footwear. Last year, safety reps reported a significant number of accidents, linked to the "Magnum Hi-Tec" footwear.

After a campaign by the CWU communication workers' union, Royal Mail has begun phasing in new shoes to improve slip resistance on wet, frosted and steel surfaces.

Shopworkers face assaults

One in 10 shopworkers has been physically assaulted at some point in their work, according to research from shopworkers' union Usdaw.

The union revealed the results during its 'Respect for Shopworkers Week' at the beginning of this month. As well as shop robberies, many staff have been assaulted in "motiveless and random attacks".

John Hannett, Usdaw general secretary, said: "It is an outrage that so many of our members can't get on with their daily job without the fear of abuse

from customers. That's why Usdaw is running its 'Freedom From Fear' campaign again this year."

Although verbal abuse was lower than in the previous survey, Usdaw argued that it remains unacceptably high. The majority of those surveyed (56%) said that they had been verbally abused at sometime in the last 12 months, with 4% claiming they are verbally abused on a daily basis.

Hannett said: "Many customers who signed our petition last year to respect

shopworkers said that it would make them stop and think before 'sounding off', so it seems that the message is hitting home."

Examples of abuse included:

- ◆ Being called an idiot with no personality or qualifications.
- ◆ A customer threat to wait outside the store to 'get me' after a refund refusal.

The industry trade body, the British Retail Consortium, has forecast a rise in incidents of violence as a result of the current economic downturn.

Unions lobby MPs on asbestos

The Unite and GMB general unions and UCATT construction union held a lobby on 28 October to press the government to overturn last year's House of Lords ruling and reinstate compensation for victims of the asbestos

condition pleural plaques.

Graham Goddard, Unite deputy general secretary, said: "There is only one cause of this disease and that is the widespread, indiscriminate use of asbestos throughout industry for years. No one

protected our people from this exposure, and now they are suffering.

"Compensation must come from those who put them at risk in the first place, and from an insurance industry which made money from that risk."

Scots inspector numbers are cut

Health and safety enforcement in Scotland is withering away, according to the University of Stirling's Occupational and Environmental Health Research Group.

Researchers found that the number of people employed by the HSE across Great Britain has dropped by 11% in five years. However in Scotland, the fall was 13%, from 304 full-time equivalents in 2003 to just 264 in 2008.

Inspectors covering factories and agriculture have dropped by 16%, while offshore inspectors were down by 20%. Only one inspector covers all of Scotland's quarrying industry, the most hazardous land-based job in the UK.

The researchers called for a doubling of the size of the enforcement staff in Scotland and better rights for trade union safety reps.

How to keep safe during winter

HSE guidance is available on how workers can remain safe during the winter.

Peter Black, the HSE's principal inspector of construction, said: "Cold weather and shorter periods of daylight mean there is more potential for accidents to happen. With a little planning, and common sense, these can be avoided."

Firms have a responsibility for those working outdoors to provide adequate welfare facilities, such as ensuring that water supplies do not freeze and gas heaters have adequate ventilation.

HSE guidance is available at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg244.pdf

Disputed figures show a fall in the numbers killed at work

The HSE said that 229 people were killed at work in 2007-08, down from 247 the year before.

Almost 110,000 workers suffered major injuries (such as amputations, burns or fractures) as well as serious injuries (involving over three days off work), down from 116,000 the previous year.

Unions said the falls in deaths and serious injuries at work prove that enforcement works.

Brendan Barber, TUC general secretary, said: "The reversal of last year's increase in fatalities is welcome news to everyone. Figures suggest that greater enforcement of the law has reduced injuries at work. So we clearly need more

enforcement — particularly in areas of occupational health, such as tackling RSI, back pain and stress, as these make up three-quarters of work-related ill health and are workers' main safety concerns."

In the last two years, the HSE and local authorities have slightly increased the number of notices issued and the number of prosecutions taken, after the historic low in enforcement in 2005-06.

The Hazards Campaign challenged the figures. It claimed the statistics drastically understate those killed in work-related incidents by excluding occupational illness deaths, such as cancer, work-related

road traffic incidents and air and offshore work deaths.

The campaign estimates the total number of people killed through work last year as between 1,400 and 1,600.

Hilda Palmer, a campaign spokesperson said: "This annual misrepresentation of the numbers killed by work encourages a false sense of security by underestimating the real risk faced by workers and members of the public, and feeds into the nonsensical 'elf and safety gorn mad' media hype, and demands from business for deregulation, light touch regulation and cuts in the enforcement burden."

The HSE statistics can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/hssoct08.htm

Asbestos is the hidden killer

Every week 20 tradespeople die from asbestos-related diseases, and this number is set to increase, according to figures from the HSE. The stark figure features as part of its 'Asbestos: the hidden

killer' campaign.

Former England and Arsenal footballer Ian Wright has given his support to the campaign.

"I used to be a plasterer and was really surprised to

learn that the number of deaths is actually on the increase year on year. If that was footballers dying, the whole of the premiership would be wiped out in just three months," he said.

Safety reps get the credit for huge improvements in safety

Union safety representatives have been crucial to securing improvements in health and safety, the government's health and safety minister said at a 30th anniversary celebration of the *Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations*.

In October, the HSE launched new guidance on worker involvement in health and safety, as well as updated guidance on the

regulations that govern safety reps' activities.

Lord McKenzie, the health and safety minister, said that union safety reps could take credit for improvements over the last 30 years since the regulations came into force.

"There is evidence that workplaces with health and safety committees where some members are selected by trade unions have a

significantly lower rate of injuries than those without cooperative health and safety management," he said.

Since the *Health and Safety at Work Act* came into force in 1975, the number of serious but non-fatal injuries reported has fallen by 70%, workplace deaths have fallen by 76% and an estimated 5,000 deaths have been prevented, the minister added.