

Speech to Hazards Conference 2008

Conference. Brothers. Sisters. We should have no qualms about using such old fashioned terms of address, for ours is an old movement. Since industrialisation began, 250 years ago, people have joined together to protect themselves and their communities, from the damage caused by work.

Groups have organised, lobbied, protested and taken direct action against the harm that capitalism causes to the health of those who produce its profits.

In 1802 children did not gain the maximum 12 hour day because the mill owners felt sorry for them. In fact at the time employers, and their apologists, argued that a 12 hour day would be bad for them. All that free time would corrupt their morals. And anyway, restricted child labour would place an intolerable burden on business.

No. Child labour was eventually abolished altogether in the UK, in 1973, because successive generations of workers, trade union activists and campaigners fought against it.

The 8 hour day was not granted by benevolent capitalists who had nothing better to do with their money. It was won by workers organising direct action, industrial action, in the face of concerted opposition. The media and employers tried to portray them as lazy, worrying about nothing. And anyway, if work is good for you, shouldn't they want more of it?

We should remember that early attempts to secure the 8 hour day failed in the face of this opposition. But they persevered until they won. Many of those involved in the struggle were not fee paying union members, but they subscribed to the idea. Action was more often than not wild cat, unofficial. The type that the modern union official is duty bound to discourage.

We didn't get the 74 Act because the bosses said 'OK. Enough is enough. We must stop killing so many people.' We got it because we had a mass union movement at the height of its powers.

And we, comrades, are the direct descendants of that line. And I hope that we are comrades, not colleagues. Colleagues are people that you work with.

Comrades are people that you fight with. And the hazards charter is our list of demands. The modern day standards that we are fighting for.

When I was asked to speak about the charter I decided to look back at previous demands to see what we had gained.

The first charter was in 1987 and it called for a Freedom of Information Act, the right to refuse dangerous work and to know what we are working with, regular paid leave for safety rep training. And it also calls for Corporate Manslaughter legislation, an idea, they tell me, which was considered zany in the 1980's.

In to the 90's we are calling for a total ban on asbestos, protection for whistleblowers, implementation of the working time directive. Many of these things have been, at least in part, achieved.

And they have been achieved in a remarkably short period of time under Labour and Tory governments. They have been achieved by you, our unions, some helpful politicians and by our Hazards Campaign.

Many of the demands that the charters made have not yet been achieved. We still want Roving Reps, the right to stop the job, the HSE to enforce current legislation, for stress to be treated like any other industrial injury, and for national recognition of Workers Memorial Day.

The fact that these are ongoing should not be a cause for dejection. We've only been at it 21 years. It took 220 to abolish child labour.

When I read those old charters I was struck by their combination of practical proposals and ambitious demands. We had detailed stipulations for applying the COSHH Regulations next to calls on government to resist to resist attempts at blackmail from the World Trade Organisation.

I was also struck by how radical we were. In the 80's we were calling for workers to have the right to paid leave to attend trade union health and safety training.

Workers, not union reps, workers.

We wanted the right to take health and safety inspectors to tribunal if they failed to enforce the law.

We wanted a Working Environment Act that would force employers to pay for worker controlled occupational health services.

Our current charter does not seem so radical. Hopefully you are all familiar with it. If you've not read it you will be familiar with many of its aims as they have become mainstream within most unions. Maybe this is why the Charter does not feel so radical, because once radical ideas have become accepted. I personally think that this mainstreaming of our ideas within the labour movement is one of the great achievements of the Hazards Campaign.

The modern Charter contains the same mix of pragmatism and aspiration. It calls for:

- Gender sensitive health and safety
- Roving Safety Reps and the right to stop the job
- Directors duties
- More resources for HSE
- Worker controlled occupational health centres
- Just and effective compensation for injury
- Acknowledgement that road risks can be work related
- A world wide ban on asbestos
- Anti-globalisation and the race to the bottom
- Environment reps
- and government recognition of workers memorial day.

We ask that you redouble your efforts to achieve these demands. Take them back to your workplace and pin them on the wall. Get the conversations going again. Take them to your branches and committees. Start pushing them back up the union agenda. As I'm sure many of you do already.

As I've described the Hazards Charter demands are not set in stone. They are always open to review. We ask that you contribute your ideas for the next charter. What is it that your members want?

I, for one, think that maybe it is time we got more radical. It's time we started demanding work that is actually good for us. Work that strengthens the body and nourishes the mind.

What about demanding a three day week?

How about demanding that the work we do will not simultaneously threaten our future existence?

I can hear the cries already. We can't afford it. It's not reasonably practicable. Well, if they genuinely can not afford for us to have better lives, and a future for the human, then maybe their system is not for us.

As we face these difficult times, and inevitably get embroiled in the struggle to defend what we have gained, maybe it is also time to look above the trenches and think about how we want the future to be.

Our forebears could only dream of what we have now. It is time for us to dream of what those who follow us could have in the future.

Thank you.