

Campaign meeting – Why should Trade Unions use health and safety as an organising tool?

The session was introduced by Janet Newsham who began by thanking the three speakers. She explained about the work that the Greater Manchester Hazards Centre was doing supporting vulnerable workers. Janet said that this was a growing part of the economy and workers were vulnerable, abused and bullied. Janet spoke about the deteriorating state of work and made reference to the latest Hazards Magazine – You will work till you drop – you sweat, you bleed, you break down, you're thrown away! Janet spoke about the safety reps she met on TUC courses concerned about timed toilet breaks, denied toilet breaks or dismissals for taking too long at the toilet. She said workers are micromanaged, scrutinised, monitored and even microchipped and summed up by saying workers are being degraded by work and there is a need for workers to fight back. To agitate for action, gain confidence to challenge and become armed with information to force our employers to act decently and abide by their legal duties and moral obligations.

Neil Hope-Collins started by saying why shouldn't Trade Unions use health and safety as an organising tool. He said that historically trade unions have been singularly bad at organising around health and safety. With the current demographic of trade union members we need to quadruple trade union membership or die! Neil said that in the private sector, 87% of workers are not covered by collective agreements. Neil's trade union Prospect have been conducting focus groups with young people and this showed most young trade unions did not know about trade unions or understand what collectivism is and they had low expectations of the workplace and low aspirations. He said we need to use specific health and safety workplace issues, where the relevance would be felt immediately.

Ali Waqaar spoke next and he explained about the poor safety conditions in McDonalds which affected peoples health and led to injuries. He explained that as a result of the deteriorating and frightening nightly scenes in the restaurant he worked in, where 200-300 people were queuing and agitated, drunk and inevitably violence broke out, Ali and his colleague carried out a survey and then presented their findings to management asking for a stop to be placed on orders when they reached an unmanageable number. He said they had asked for proper guard rails, better training for management etc. However their managements response was to disregard the results of the survey, so they registered a grievance and eventually management dismissed them for agitating the workforce and not working hard enough! He concluded by saying that it is important that young people join trade unions and also that vulnerable people join trade unions and that other unions work in solidarity with them.

Ian Hodson was the final speaker and he showed a film that BFAWU had produced (<https://youtu.be/o49vXLoamXE>) and the campaign they were running on McBurns, which is highlighting the burns McDonald workers are being left with, because of working conditions and equipment they used. Ian spoke about the courage of workers on zero hours contracts to stand up and challenge their employers. He said that it was a health and safety issue, that young workers are dying by suicide because of a lack of money and that this is happening to our children. And that we need to fight for positive life changes for people and encourage them to join a trade union. Ian said that they were starting to work with Liverpool football fans to get their message out and to take trade unionism to people who are not working in organised workplaces.

In the discussions that followed delegates recognised the importance of recruiting and organising workers and especially young workers. They said trade unions need to be in every part of the community.