

Hazards Conference 2018 Workshop: Resources and creative action for safety reps

Strength in numbers: TUC's big push on health and safety and organising

<http://www.hazards.org/organise/strength.htm>

Unions in action

1. Put yourself in their shoes

A new food factory employing 500 workers, from a variety of nationalities, opened on a greenfield site in the Midlands. By talking to the workers one-to-one, the Unite organising team found that the main grumble was having to share wellies. The incoming shift had to take over the boots of the outgoing shift. The boots leaked and no personal lockers were provided. This was an issue that was widely and deeply felt.

What did Unite do?

- Newsletters covering these issues were circulated in “all the languages we had knowledge of.”
- The leaders then took around a petition calling on the employer to meet its duty to provide effective personal protective equipment (PPE) and to provide lockers.
- When the employer did not respond to this or to requests from organisers for access to workers on the site, Unite organised a mass sign-up of members and over 200 individual grievances were lodged.
- The employer was given the choice of dealing with these grievances on an individual basis, which would have taken weeks, or collectively on the basis that they would grant recognition. The employer opted for recognition.
- The employer agreed to remedy the issue of the boots but then bought inferior boots. This was soon picked up the newly elected representatives who took up the issue. Eventually the employer had to replace the boots.
- Unite followed up with another survey to monitor progress.

Unions in action

2. From squeezing balls to touching nerves

A **UNISON branch** issued “stress balls” to workers in one office where there was a low union membership. A week later they put round an email to all the staff and said that if they felt they needed to use a stress ball then they probably had a problem with stress. Squeezing a ball was not going to make it go away, but joining a union might.

The **teaching union NASUWT** issued cheap plastic thermometers to teachers in schools where there was a problem with high temperature, along with advice that, if the temperature got over a certain level, to get in touch with the union.

Retail union Usdaw targeted workers in a large supermarket chain where there was a problem with violence and abuse from customers. The union’s ‘Freedom from Fear’ campaign, which called on the employer to take action against anyone who abused staff, touched a nerve with many non-members who then joined the union.

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3. The business of organising

Survey Talk to workers, identify hazards and make an action list.

Campaign priorities: Pick the top concerns and do your homework. Check your union website or the TUC health and safety pages for information on the topic and some ideas.

Probe Find out if there have been inspections by safety enforcers and any citations – HSE puts enforcement details online www.hse.gov.uk/enforce/

Get committed Establish a cross-union safety and health committee so that all the union health and safety representatives come together regularly.

Get training Train workers on their safety and health legal rights and how to identify hazards. A short lunchtime meeting might be enough.

Communicate Use newsletters, noticeboards or social media to keep members informed and to show non-members that the union is active on issues that concern them.

Research Analyse injuries and illnesses - the organising committee or union safety and health committee can request regular breakdowns from the employer.

Investigate Find out what chemicals workers use and how much they're exposed to. Request a list of hazardous chemicals, Safety Data Sheets, and worker exposure measurements.

Involve Initiate group activities among workers to assert their rights by filing complaints on hazards, wearing badges highlighting workplace hazards, or asking the HSE or local authority to inspect the workplace.

Remember Union safety reps in organised workplaces can demand 'all the information in the employer's knowledge' on health and safety issues. Some, where for example injured workers are named, may have to be anonymised, but can't be withheld.

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4. Going by the book

A few years ago Unite was involved in an organising campaign at the book distribution company, Gardners Book. The company employed around 1,000 people in Eastbourne and had a relatively high staff turnover, low pay and poor conditions. Its main competitor was Amazon.

One organising issue revolved around heat in the warehouse on hot days. The warehouse had no air-conditioning system and a lot of the fans were broken. Rather than the union bringing an individual or collective grievance against the firm the union purchased 10 thermometers. Members were responsible for taking these into the warehouse, placing them in the hot spots and keeping a log of the temperature every two hours, night and day – the firm was a 24-hour operation.

To do this they had to find people on other shifts to help. The non-members involved or identified for this activity quickly joined the union, because they were actively involved in something to help themselves. They were all very easily developed into activists.

The monitoring was linked to a reporting system, establishing regular contact to a large group of members and activists. Previously there had always been poor attendance at union meetings but this issue and the method of addressing it not only boosted membership and the activist base, it also gave members a purpose and reason to attend union meetings.

In terms of success it boosted membership by around 200 and doubled the activist base from around 7 to 14.