**Report from the 24th National Hazards Conference**

Fri, 19th – Sun, 21st July, Keele University

The National Hazards Conference is the UK’s biggest educational/organising event for trade union safety reps and activists. It has met annually since 1989 and involves hundreds of activists– a form of cross-union rank and file network - overwhelmingly made up of workplace safety reps.

This is the gathering, probably unique in the world, where safety reps who carry out invaluable but often routine activity in their local workplace are able to adopt a broader campaigning role as safety ‘activists’ and campaigners. The weekend has a varied format; a mixture of plenary sessions, debates, campaign meetings and a comprehensive workshop programme (see final page). The latest and indeed future developments are publicised and analysed. Additionally reps are able to swap experience and information with delegates from a wide range of sectors/jobs and indeed from other countries. Added to this it also provides an excellent forum for UCU safety reps to meet and discuss ideas and strategies. Within this context a side meeting was held with 7 UCU safety reps discussing a wide – range of health & safety issues within their respective colleges.

Background

The 24th Conference was an important one, held at a time when the safety and health of working people is under threat to a degree unseen in 80 years. *There is hardly a single area of health and safety that is not under serious assault from the government and employers*. It is glaringly obvious that Cameron’s 2012 resolution of ‘killing off the health and safety culture’ is still driving the government’s agenda.

The government’s desire to reduce enforcement and the resulting protection of workers is underlined by their claim that the budget of the Health and Safety Executive, already pathetically miniscule in relation to their task, is well on the way to being slashed by around 40%. Enforcement is being replaced by advice, and ‘self-regulation’ is now the watchword. Proactive inspection has been abolished for the **vast majority** of workplaces, and every regulation and code of practice, however vital, have been put under review with the aim of dilution or eradication. Statutory consultation periods have now been cut to the bone and indeed, workers have not been consulted at all over the levels of regulation needed.

Cameron continued rubbishing health and safety in January 2013 telling entrepreneurs of the need to cut health and safety rules that stop young people getting work experience. Just days later, a 16 year old apprentice was killed in an incident with a lathe at an engineering company, only weeks after starting work. A serious issue for our union as lots of our members teach apprentices and attempt to prepare them for the world of work.

Enforcement is in retreat and hiding. It’s now almost impossible to contact the HSE, and proactive, preventive inspections by L.A.’s and HSE have been banned in falsely classed ‘low hazard/risk’ sectors which cover the majority of workplaces. New evidence shows proactive inspections not only save lives but save employers money too.  But government continues the ideological destruction of the regulatory enforcement environment that workers won by collective action over generations, using the lie that it is a ‘burden on business’.

**Summary Highlights**

The **initial plenary**, chaired by Hilda Palmer, had three main speakers; Omana George of ANROEV (Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims), Dave Smith from the Blacklist Support Group, and Louise Taggart from FACK (Families against Corporate Killers). The speakers addressed a range of issues that are having a detrimental impact on workers lives. Omana spoke of how chemicals that are banned in the EU are being used in India and Pakistan and are killing thousands of workers. She also spoke of the huge shortage of doctors and health care in Asia. In a brilliant, hard-hitting speech, Dave Smith highlighted the campaign against the major construction companies who are blocking trade union/H&S reps from securing work on the some of the biggest sites in Europe and Louise Taggart gave a moving tribute to the thousands of workers killed in the course of their work.

She observed that the problem was not too much health and safety but too little, that British workers face a conspiracy by government, media and some employers who deride and poke fun at health and safety standards. ‘Health and safety is not a matter of fun, workers health and safety is as serious as it gets.’ She explained the key role of FACK presentations. ‘We put ourselves through it, in order that you and your loved ones never have to walk in our shoes’.

The Saturday morning plenary was well-attended and again there was a range of speakers. Perhaps the one that stood out was Professor Phil Taylor from Strathclyde University who has produced a stunning report entitled *“Performance management and the new workplace tyranny”.* There were 3 key elements dealt with; performance management, lean working and absence management. The report focuses on how management, in both public and private sectors, have gone on the offensive against workers who have a poor sickness/absence record and can be portrayed as ‘malingers’.

In a brilliant presentation, Taylor outlined the three main elements of his report. Firstly, how employers are conducting an annual workplace cull of ‘underperformers’ or ‘non-compliant’ workers, forcing them out of the door. Secondly, the incessant intensification of work with larger volumes of work being ‘squeezed’ out of smaller and smaller numbers of employees, subject to increasing micromanagement. And thirdly, the complete disregard for workers’ dignity by employers who pile on the pressure within the workplace, with this total lack of respect leading to the prevalence of a completely toxic atmosphere.

The 2013 **Alan** (Dalton) award, named after another sadly-missed Asbestos campaigner, was presented to Helen Lynn from the Alliance for Cancer Prevention, for her tireless work in the field of combatting breast and other cancers at regional, national and international levels.

Delegates had the choice of 2 from 17 different workshops, organised under 5 broad headings; Health and Safety Issues, Safety Reps and Organising, Discovering problems, Dealing with Risks, Campaigning with Members and Dealing with Employers (see below).

Later on Saturday afternoon, there were 3 Keynote meetings and then on Sunday morning there were 5 further meetings on current safety campaigns. These then fed into the final plenary session, which laid out perspectives for work in the coming year and addressed some of the major priorities facing our movement in the immediate future.

The campaign meetings were:

1..How build the campaign against the current attacks on health and safety,

2. Stakeholders or Victims? Does tripartism work for us?

3. Access to Justice – changes to Legal Aid and civil liability, the impact on our members’ Personal injury Cases

4. Developing the campaigning to reduce Occupational and Environmental Cancer and

5. Developing the Campaign against Asbestos in Schools

**The 2013 Hazards Conference was a brilliant one, well focussed, informative, campaigning and inclusive. The venue was excellent. The refreshments were regular, the meals varied, high quality and very plentiful! All in all, it was an excellent experience for any safety rep, whatever their workplace or union and it is crucial that the UCU continue to delegate safety reps to future conferences.**

Alan McShane delegate, *Blackburn UCU branch* and *Trades Union Council*

Delegates chose 2 from a wide choice of Workshops:

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| Reps functions & employer duties | Fire risk assessment |
| Reps functions & employer duties | Building the union around H&S |
| Safety committees; strength or weakness | Making the case; winning the argument |
| Working with the enforcer | PINs and UINs |
| Improving workplace inspection | Managing sickness absence |
| Investigating an incident / injury | Bullying and harassment |
| Body mapping | Excessive workloads |
| Making surveys work | Musculo-skeletal injuries |
| Risk assessment and safety reps | Violence at work |
| Stress risk assessment | Work and cancer |