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HSE Consultation

The health & safety system of Great Britain: Be part of the solution

Last week the Health & Safety Executive launched a three month consultation on a updated Strategy for the next period. The TUC has broadly welcomed this document. As part of the consultation process, the HSE is holding seven regional consultation events in the form of workshops during January 2009.

The workshops are morning only, half-day events, and attendance is by invitation. Registration and coffee from 9.30am for a 10am start. A light lunch will be provided at 12.30pm, allowing attendees to leave at 1pm. You will be notified of the venue when you register. The dates are:

- **Liverpool** Thursday 08 January 2009
- **Newcastle** Tuesday 13 January 2009
- **Bristol** Thursday 15 January 2009
- **Birmingham** Tuesday 20 January 2009
- **Cardiff** Thursday 22 January 2009
- **London** Tuesday 27 January 2009
- **Glasgow** Thursday 29 January 2009

To register please go to: www.glasgows.co.uk/hsestrategyconsultation or phone 017272 767717

The full draft strategy is at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/strategy/index.htm>

Any UCU representatives who would like to contribute to this process can register an interest to attend their local event and help shape the future strategy for health and safety in Great Britain. The HSE will then invite people. (the criteria for invitation isn't clear) Anyone who is invited to one of these events, if you send an e-mail to jbamford@ucu.org.uk early in the new year I will send you a short briefing note on some of the issues to raise during the workshops.

New H&S Poster on the way

The HSE Board has agreed (26 November 2008) to produce a new information poster for display at the workplace, and has now appointed a team to re-design it. The key difference will be to advise workers to contact the HSE InfoLine to get contact details for their workplace HSE Inspector, rather than relying on their employer to 'write-in' the information, which many still don't do. There will be no immediate duty on an employer to replace their existing poster, but when it is finally produced reps may want to approach their employer to make the change.

We drew attention to the fact that local HSE office telephone numbers had been removed from their website early this year. You can get your local HSE office number by contacting InfoLine on 0845 345 0055.

'The Fun Police'

Anyone who watched this 'Cutting Edge' programme on Channel 4 on the evening of Thursday, 4th December would have thought it had been written by one of the fatuous commentators and columnists of the Sun, Daily Mail or Telegraph. It was a dreadfully biased programme that trivialised and demeaned the status of occupational health, safety & welfare in the UK, and totally ignored the thousands of real victims of employer negligence and failure to comply with statutory duties, and their families.

The programme failed to provide any context or background to the work of health and safety inspectors and practitioners. Official statistics published by the Health and Safety Executive show that 229 people were killed as a result of work-related incidents in the year 2007-08. An article in the December issue of Safety and Health Practitioner Magazine correctly identifies the true figure is much higher, once work-related fatalities on the road are included, along with deaths from work-related diseases such as mesothelioma and other cancers. Alternative figures suggest the true total of deaths caused by work per year in the UK could be as many as 50,000. UN body the International Labour Organisation estimates a worldwide figure for work-related fatalities of 2.2 million per annum.

None of this background was presented in the programme, in spite of these figures being readily available. Neither was there any presentation of a worker's view, nor one from any trade union. No attempt was made to contact or interview anyone injured in a workplace incident, or those whose loved ones have died, despite the pressure group Families Against Corporate Killers (FACK) being willing and available to explain the devastating impact that work-related deaths have on others. The majority of screen time was dedicated to a health and safety consultant who has no enforcement powers or legal duties; at the expense of a legitimate enforcement officer, a Health and Safety Executive inspector, who deal with serious issues rather than the trivia that the documentary decided to focus upon. At no point were viewers informed that HSE Inspectors are law enforcement officers who, like police officers, carry the Queen's Warrant.

The documentary spent a lot of time on domestic safety issues in the kitchen and public safety concerns like the Donkey Derby and "Conkers Bonkers", which do not fall under the work-related safety remit of anyone, and the Supermarket Car Parks item is more a public safety issue. As such, these matters were both irrelevant and highly misleading as examples of an Inspectors work. It's analogous to seeing a lecture's main job does as marking the register.

A local authority Environmental Health Officer spent most of her time in the programme in false nail salons; again, hardly a cutting edge example of occupational health and safety issues. It just made her look like a busybody. The whole programme treated viewers to an hour of trivialisation with only the merest reference to the work of regulators to provide balance. The programme was not in any sense a serious piece of journalism. It was an insult to all those who have been injured at work, or who have lost friends, colleagues and loved ones because of work, and to those professionals who work hard to ensure that fewer fatalities and injuries occur in the future.

If you saw, and were offended by the way this programme presented its trivial and irrelevant information, please write to Channel 4 and complain. You should write to: Mr Andy Duncan, Chief Executive, Channel 4, 124 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2TX.

H&S Fact sheets

A reminder to all reps to check our website pages regularly for new and updated fact sheets. Our latest is some advice on cyber-bullying by students of members of staff. UCU are contributing to a project organised by Becta, the Government agency charged with promoting the use of information and communications technology, on cyber-bullying (Web link here please). We will also be producing some guidance on "What is Health & Safety about", and more detail on how H&S issues should be raised in institutions, and who safety reps need to talk to in the managerial structure if we are to achieve the substantial changes needed.

Biometric Security: UNISON wins victory over fingerprinting at work



Most of our reps outside London probably missed this. UNISON has won a victory at Westminster City Council by convincing the authority to withdraw 'big brother' fingerprint recognition machines at workplaces.

The machines were introduced at some council worksites by community protection management in the autumn, without consultation. The union campaigned against what it called "big brother proposals based on mistrust of staff, and a disproportionate way of keeping records of working time."

The Westminster UNISON branch secretary told the council chief executive that members would refuse to provide their fingerprints. Following discussions, the council decided to remove the machinery, and said they would not pursue their use in the foreseeable future. Read the UNISON press release at http://www.unison.org.uk/news/news_view.asp?did=4989

A similar proposal has been made as part of a new build development at a large FE college in the North West. Although there have been specifications prepared for tender, some members of the SMT don't apparently know about it. So consultation even breaks down at that level!

If anyone has examples of this, let us know. *Just another step down the road to the ultimate surveillance society.*

UCU Priorities for 2009

i) Safety rep functions and time-off: We have just prepared another fact-sheet on safety rep's time-off (or rather, **time-on** to safety rep functions). Time-off continues to be a major issue for many safety rep's – the advice line continually gets complaints of employers failing to permit time-off for safety rep functions, despite a clear and unambiguous duty on them in the SRSC Regulation 4(2). We want to make a major focus on this for 2009, and as part of that are encouraging Branches and local associations to think about negotiating an agreement with their employer. Such an agreement should:

1. recognise the importance of safety reps and the work they do
2. aim to secure a minimum weekly time allowance for safety reps to do basic admin, keep up to date, organise with other trade unions, and other general work that underpins the safety reps job. This will NOT INCLUDE the time they need to prepare for and undertake a workplace inspection; investigate complaints and incidents; represent members; meet the Inspector or attend the Safety Committee meetings.
3. set out very clearly that additional time, over and above the basic allocation away from the normal job will be needed for the functions given by SRSC Regulation 4(1)(a-h).
4. require employers to plan budget allocations for safety reps activity, which should be allocated centrally, so no individual department has to bear the cost. Employers budget for all other statutory requirement, but rarely for funding the safety reps statutory functions, nor the duties imposed on the employer to facilitate safety reps activities.

This fact-sheet is at <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm>

ii) New Build: we will publish a fact sheet covering new build issues early in the new year. Employers are consistently failing to consult with UCU and the other unions over new buildings. Money available for new build is aimed primarily at benefiting students and learners – staff facilities and accommodation are a poor relation. We already have a couple of fact-sheets available which touch on most new build issues:

http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/docs/a/h/hsbrief_hotdesk.doc - and

http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/docs/3/2/hsfact_office_space.doc

http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/docs/9/d/hsfact_toilets.doc - also affects staff in new build.

Staff changes

We'd like to say "Welcome" to Barry Lovejoy, head of FE at UCU, who has taken managerial responsibility for Health & Safety following the departure of Roger Kline at the end of October.

Sadly, we'd also like to take this opportunity to say goodbye to Linda Ball, who is leaving UCU at Christmas. Linda has provided this newsletter with content, layout and publication detail since we started to produce it almost 3 years ago. Her main responsibility has been the planning and organisation of UCU training courses for reps, which has expanded tremendously over the past few years. She has been a highly valued and really great member of the team, and we will all miss her.

Finally, we'd like to wish all UCU safety reps a Happy Christmas and a well-organised new year, and look forward to you all returning to the fray refreshed and ready to continue the constant battle to persuade employers to behave correctly towards the health, safety and welfare of their staff.

The UCU Health & Safety Team

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