

Workers Memorial Day Public Consultation – UNISON Response

UNISON is the largest public service trade union with 1.3 million members employed within the various services including local authorities, education, health, the voluntary sector, police, and the utilities.

UNISON has been promoting Workers Memorial Day for many years and welcomes this consultation. In 2006 the UNISON National Delegate Conference called for the formal recognition of Workers Memorial Day by the UK.

The support for official recognition within the UK has grown year on year. Indeed as recognised within the consultation document, numerous other countries already recognise the Day.

With regard to the specific questions raised within the consultation document, UNISON's position is as follows.

1) *Do you agree that the UK should officially recognise Workers Memorial Day?*

Yes. UNISON believes that there is a strong case for official recognition of this event. There is insufficient awareness of the appalling level of deaths caused by work activities. Although HSE statistics show that 180 workers were killed while at work last year, this is very much an underestimation. It excludes those covered by other regulators and the 1,000 people who on average are killed while driving at work on public roads. Even more significant, most people who are killed through work do not die immediately. They die as a result of illness caused by occupational diseases. It is impossible to put an accurate figure on the number of people whose lives are cut short as a result of their work or working environment, but it is certainly several tens of thousands.

An article published in *Safety and Health Practitioner* last year (*The Whole Story*, December 2008, www.shponline.co.uk/article.asp?pagename=archive&article_id=8265) explains how work-related illnesses, including cancers, respiratory illnesses, and heart disease could account for up to 50,000 deaths per year.

It is important that these deaths are recognised and that there is more awareness of the dangers, both long and short-term, that work can pose. Official recognition will help to increase awareness around the importance of health and safety and may also help to dispel some of the myths circulated around health and safety. The Day is also an occasion for the relatives and friends of those who have died to remember their lost ones. By officially recognising the Day, Britain would join the 19 other national Governments who have already recognised the Day including Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Greece. The statements made by the Prime Minister in support of Workers Memorial Day in 2009 greatly helped raise awareness of the Day.

2) *Do you agree that official recognition should take effect from 28th April 2010?*

Yes. UNISON believes that official recognition should commence as soon as possible.

3) *Do you agree that, with a view to promoting UK-wide involvement in Workers Memorial Day, a different UK region should lead on the commemorations each year?*

No. UNISON believes that it should remain a national event with local and regional events. We believe that all workplaces should be encouraged to hold their own local events; and all local towns and cities in the UK should be encouraged to hold events on the Day. In addition the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments should be asked to support the Day.

UNISON believes that if a different region were to lead on the Day each year, there would be a lack of continuity and that it could lead to a decline in local and other regional events.

It is important that the event remains one that is organised primarily by the trade union movement alongside those groups who support the victims and families of victims, but supported by Government, rather than an event organised by Government. Events occur across the UK organised by local groups, grass roots organisations, union branches, and the families of victims. Each year, UNISON sees a steady rise amongst its branches of events being organised to mark the Day, often jointly organised with the relevant employer, and other relevant groups. Some of these many events involving UNISON are listed at: www.unison.org.uk/safety/pages_view.asp?did=4783).

4) *Do you agree that Government-sponsored websites – such as BusinessLink and Directgov – should promote Workers Memorial Day each year and publicise details of commemorative events?*

Yes. The HSE website would also be appropriate.

5) *Do you agree that the Government should encourage workplace commemorations of Workers Memorial Day, each year, in manners appropriate to individual workplaces?*

Yes. Work is where the exposure to the hazards that cause death and injury occur. Workplaces are therefore the most appropriate place for events to remember those that have died. UNISON believes that the workplace is the most effective place for commemorative events and would encourage either a minutes silence at noon, workplace meetings, or other events on the Day.

Employers participation needs to be encouraged, because by doing so their awareness on health and safety can also be raised, and because a joint union-employer event represents an opportunity for them to collectively also consider and discuss the health and safety of those still at work.

6) *Do you agree that Government should, where appropriate, encourage commemorations to be held on the nearest Saturday to Workers Memorial Day?*

No. The Day is recognised internationally on the 28th and within the UK that is the date that has been traditionally used for any events. Official recognition of the Day should encourage greater awareness of and participation in the Day. As covered in reply to the previous question the participation of employers needs to be encouraged. Given that most workplaces are closed on Saturdays, moving it to that day would remove the connection to the workplace, and distance employers from the event, and at a time when employers and union branches are increasingly organising joint events. In fact when Workers Memorial Day has occurred at the weekend, many workplaces and UNISON branches have organised their events to take place on either the working day just before or just after the weekend.

Lastly, on occasion, the nearest Saturday to the 28th April would also be May Day which would lead to confusion between the two events.

7) *Do you agree that Government Ministers should be actively involved in commemorating Workers Memorial Day each year?*

Yes. UNISON would welcome the active involvement of Government Ministers on the Day. That could include making supportive speeches, attending commemorative events, visiting workplaces, or announcing initiatives aimed at preventing further deaths. Ministers at all levels and in all departments should be encouraged to take part, by at least wearing the purple “forget me not” ribbon that is the symbol of the Day. Ministerial involvement would help to raise the profile of the Day and the importance of workplace health and safety.

8) *Have you any other proposals for marking Workers Memorial Day each year?*

Yes. As part of a number of events for the Day, some UNISON branches have negotiated with their employers to fly flags on their buildings at half mast during previous Workers Memorial Days. UNISON would like to see flags on all public buildings lowered to half mast on the Day, as already happen on many municipal buildings.

In addition we would wish to see a minutes silence observed in the UK and Scottish Parliaments as well as the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies if they are sitting at noon on that Day. If we accept that the Day deserves official recognition and if the Legislature wishes to demonstrate their support for the Day, a minutes silence would be an important step towards demonstrating this. A further step towards promoting the serious nature of workplace health and safety would be for each of the Legislatures to have a debate on the state of workers health, safety, and welfare, either on 28 April, or if this happens to be on the weekend, then on the closest day of sitting.

It is however important that public and other bodies which support the Day do not only use it as an occasion to remember those who died but also take the opportunity to ensure that action is taken to ensure that others do not die as a result of injury or illness caused by work in the future.

Official recognition of the Day does not mean that the job is done. It's not just about remembering the dead. Workers Memorial Day and any events held are not an end in themselves. The Day, any events organised, and official recognition are a means to an end – the end being the ongoing campaign: to raise awareness on the importance of health and safety; for safer and healthier work; and for fewer work-related deaths, injuries, and ill-health.

If you ask the families of those killed or injured by work, for them remembering their own loved ones is only part of the purpose, they like any other victim want to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else, and thereby prevent other families suffering the same loss.

9) *Have you any other comments on this consultation exercise and its proposals? If yes, please give details.*

Yes. If we accept that the ultimate goal is safer and healthier work, then the Government needs to consider how we can move towards it. Holding commemorative events is only one way of raising awareness. This can and must also be done by making better use of the tools currently in place and improving them where appropriate, which includes: more effective regulatory standards; stronger action by the enforcement agencies, additional statutory functions for safety reps; better protection for safety reps against victimisation by employers; roving union safety reps with the powers to go into unorganised workplaces; improved enforcement of consultative and participative arrangements in workplaces; and stricter controls on employers to ensure safe working conditions and the prevention of harm in the future.

This response is on behalf of UNISON nationally, and was produced by UNISON's Health and Safety Unit and the National Health and Safety Committee.

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