

Safety in numbers

Recruiting and organising around health and safety. Updated 2016

Safety in numbers: recruiting and organising around health and safety

“Workers who are encouraged to have a voice and are given the ability to influence health and safety are safer and healthier than those who do not.” Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 2005.

These words from the government’s own regulatory body explains why trade union health and safety representatives (hereafter referred to as safety reps) are a key part of ensuring UNISON’s 1.3 million members stay well, while delivering the vital services that everyone needs. Good health and safety means not only safe and healthy workers but also better public services, safer workplaces and safer service users.

Safety reps are also a key part of UNISON’s organising and campaigning strategy. They are the eyes and ears of the workplace. This guide explains:

1. The role of safety reps in a branch’s recruiting, organising and campaigning strategy.
2. How to recruit and organise safety reps in your branch.
3. How to identify health and safety issues.
4. How to achieve improvements in health and safety, including case studies of successful health and safety campaigns.

The role of safety reps

Safety reps are the eyes and ears of the workplace. Their legally protected functions provide them with the opportunity to identify issues and deliver improvements in members’ everyday working lives. These may range from major issues that affect everyone, such as workload and stress, to more localised issues such as providing the right tools and clothing, and simple but significant improvements to the working environment.

The Safety Representatives and Safety Committee (SRSC) Regulations (also known as the Brown Book) set a wide a wide range of rights and functions. To get a full understanding of these please read the UNISON guide on the role of safety reps (stock number 1684) available from the UNISON online catalogue (see Appendix 2).

However this guide will focus on describing on how these functions can assist your branch in campaigning and organising around health and safety.

Carry out health and safety inspections: As a legal minimum safety reps have the right to carry out four inspections per year. In addition they can make additional inspections where there has been a substantial change in the conditions of work or if new and relevant information comes to light. For full information on when and how to carry out inspections please read the UNISON guide “Health and safety inspections at work: a guide for UNISON safety reps” (stock number 1939) (see Appendix 2). These four inspections may vary in their scope and depth, not every inspection needs to be accompanied with clipboard, although some means of recording your findings would be required. Carrying out regular health and safety inspections can transform your branch’s organising and campaigning capacity. They provide opportunities to:

- speak to members and non-members
- identify campaign issues
- identify and recruit new safety reps

- recruit new members (when carrying out an inspection always carry some recruitment application forms, and where DOCAS is not available make sure you get them to sign up by direct debit)
- generally improve UNISON's profile.

Where workplaces have not been inspected within the last year make sure they receive an inspection as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Investigate complaints and make

representations on behalf of members: safety reps have the right to represent members on any measures that might substantially affect the health and safety of their members. If a member raises a concern, they should be given individual support and advice, and there may also be an opportunity to ask what they think and to see if they want to become more involved by becoming a safety rep, steward or informal contact. Again this is an excellent organising and recruitment opportunity. It is important to advertise any successes, large or small, and also use any opportunity to raise the profile of UNISON. Small successes are the bread and butter of UNISON's activities, and help show how it can be a part of members' everyday working life.

Time off and other rights: safety reps are legally entitled to time off to carry out their functions, providing additional protection in the workplace in a climate when facility time is increasingly under threat. They are also entitled to receive the information they need to carry out their functions, and be consulted on anything that could affect the health, safety and welfare of its members. These could include accident and sickness absence figures, individual accident and near miss reports and information on workplace reorganisations.

Joint health and safety committees: an employer must establish a joint safety committee if two or more health and safety reps request this. These committees have the power to involve all workers in how their health and safety is managed. However for this to happen it is important that trade unions are represented on these committees and that

members feel they have the power to influence its' deliberations. Members must therefore know when these committees meet, who represents them and how/who to contact to make sure their voice is heard.

Training: safety reps by law are entitled to time off with pay to get trained by their union on health and safety issues. To make sure Safety Reps can carry out their role effectively it is important they get trained as soon as possible. There are a number of UNISON and TUC courses available for safety reps and details of these are available from the UNISON website (see details Appendix 2).

Recruiting safety reps

UNISON has already been successful in recruiting and retaining over 6,000 safety reps who are an invaluable tool for organising the workplace. However we cannot afford to be complacent and if UNISON is to continue to play a role in making workplaces safer it needs to not only recruit more safety reps, but also recruit safety reps that are representative of UNISON's wider membership.

There should be at least one safety rep in every workplace (see UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice). UNISON in total covers over 227,000 workplaces. That means that if UNISON is to have one safety rep covering each workplace, we need to recruit over 220,000 safety reps. Where it is not possible to recruit one safety rep per workplace, try to make sure each workplace is covered and is subject to regular workplace inspections.

Also as the UNISON website says (see Appendix 2 "Get members to recruit") "Like recruits like". The best people to recruit safety reps are other safety reps.

Getting members more active: The most effective way of recruiting new safety reps and activists is by talking to members (and potential members), listening to what they say and finding out what issues are likely to motivate them to become active.

Health and safety inspections and investigations provide the ideal means of initiating these conversations. Listening is a key part of recruiting.

Members are often the experts on health and safety in their workplaces. They know the job, they know the hazards, and they often know the most effective way of eliminating or managing the risks. Very often all they need is the training to turn this knowledge into action. By listening and giving them the time to speak you will be giving them the confidence to become active. Some will become a fully trained safety rep, and others a contact who can help distribute leaflets and other campaign material. Each contribution plays its part in making UNISON a stronger and more influential union.

Proportionality: This is a pre-requisite of any healthy democracy and it is important that UNISON's representatives, including its' safety reps, are proportionate and representative of its membership.

- 43% of UNISON's safety reps are women, compared to 75% of its' total membership;
- 14% and 42% are under the ages of 40 and 50 respectively, compared to 27% and 57% of total membership.

It is therefore particularly important that UNISON recruits more women and younger people as safety reps, and that members see reps who understand their concerns. The best people to understand the needs of women are other women. Likewise, although experience can be important, younger reps may find it easier to relate to younger members. Of course though any help in recruiting and organising around health and safety should be welcomed.

Health and safety campaigning

Since 2010 UNISON has had to contend with successive governments that portray health and safety as unnecessary "red tape". In addition, cuts in public services and in the resources available to regulatory bodies such as the HSE, have all contributed to making work less safe.

For example, these cuts have drastically reduced the pro-active work of the HSE in preventing accidents and ill health at work. At the same time the government has introduced changes to the law that make it harder for workers to get justice should these accidents occur. However the withdrawal of regulatory enforcement from the vast majority of workplaces has left a vacuum that only safety reps can fill, as they become the eyes and ears for identifying wrong doing in the workplace.

In addition identifying and campaigning on the health and safety issues that matter most to workers is the best way of convincing them of its' importance. Every worker is affected by health and safety. For some this can be life threatening injury or ill health, whereas for others it may be something that, although not life threatening, could have a significant detrimental effect on their lives. Even relatively minor injuries can, especially where it is part of an accumulative process, contribute to long term health problems.

In a recent survey for UNISON, 90% of safety reps identified stress as being in their top five hazards at work, with other contributory factors such as bullying and harassment, violence, and excessive workloads also featuring strongly. However different issues will affect different workplaces. UNISON's campaign for a legal maximum temperature at work is particularly important for workers in the catering sector, protection of lone workers is important for those working in the community or other isolated settings and a reduction in manual handling will be particularly relevant to the health and care sectors. The key is to listen to what members are saying, as they are often best placed to know what the hazards are and how to prevent them in their workplaces.

What makes a successful campaign?

Detailed advice on identifying and delivering a successful campaign can be found on the UNISON website, and in particular its “Effective campaigning guide” (see appendix 2). Campaigns that have a good chance of success, are easily understood and worth the effort.

Some health and safety issues, such as stress, are widely felt. Other campaigns, although more localised affecting smaller groups, require less effort and resources to achieve a successful outcome, and may mean a great deal to those affected. They all can show the difference a trade union can make and expose other underlying failures (such as not carrying out routine work inspections and risk assessments), which if left unresolved can lead to more widely felt consequences.

It is important that any campaign has clearly defined objectives. These goals should be realistic with a reasonable chance of success. Criteria for success could include:

- improve and increase the profile of the union
- increase in the number of safety reps and members recruited
- influencing the decision of an employer. Remember often the most effective campaign is that which influences a decision before it is made
- a reduction of risk to injury or illness
- an increase in awareness amongst workers, members and management to a health and safety hazard.

Case study

“I wanted to show members that UNISON can make a difference.”

Carmen was working as a dental nurse in an NHS trust in Northern Ireland.

“As a female in a male-dominated area, at first I felt intimidated,” she recalls. “However, it didn’t take me long to find my feet.

“I undertook the training offered by UNISON and then through the ICTU (Irish Congress of Trade Unions). I then enrolled in the National Examining Board occupational health and safety course at night class.

“On becoming a safety rep I set out to promote health and safety within the trust, particularly dental services, and show members that UNISON can make a difference. With the roll-out of risk assessment audit tools, I met management and staff to find a way forward.

“One of the issues I focussed on was the lack of appropriate ergonomic seating for dental nurses. This was a big issue for dental nurses, not only causing them serious discomfort, but also storing up potentially serious musculoskeletal problems for the future.

“We got the information we needed through the roll out of risk-assessment audit tools. Some staff were not happy with the additional workloads this placed on them, but when we explained why we wanted the information and how it could be used to improve their working lives, they came round.

“Armed with all the information, I persuaded management to first trial and then order a selection of chairs.

“All of this boosted morale as dental nurses felt that management now took their complaints seriously. This was good for the trust, good for its workers, and good for UNISON. The branch increased its membership as well as its number of safety reps. I was particularly pleased at the increase in women safety reps.”

Publicise your successes: whatever your successes are it is important that you let members and potential members know about them. UNISON does a lot of good work that, unless it tells members about it, will go unnoticed. Some of the most effective campaigning is that which influences a decision before it is made. Whatever the success it is important the branch finds a way of telling everyone about it (see appendix 2).

Finding out what members think

The routine duties and functions of a safety rep: whether carrying out inspections or investigating accidents, safety reps will be presented with opportunities to talk with members and find out about health and safety issues that concern them. Very often these may be easily resolved through practical solutions, that the union can take to employers (through, for example joint health and safety committees), while others could form, or be integrated into, a long term campaign that involves the whole of your branch.

As described above joint health and safety committees can play a prominent role in campaigning around health and safety. Not only can they demonstrate the power and influence trade unions have, but they can also help in identifying and focussing on the health and safety issues that matter for your members. For this to happen it is important that members know what the issues these committees cover and how they can influence its agenda.

Surveys/questionnaires/audits of workers regarding their health and concerns can be excellent ways of identifying, and involving members in, campaigning issues. These could range from detailed complex exercises, such as stress audits, to short simple surveys consisting of only a few questions. The length of the survey will depend on its purpose, the level of information required and the time restraints of both those designing/surveying/analysing its results and those completing it. Although additional questions may produce more information they may also lead to lower response rates. Online tools such as surveymonkey (see appendix 2) can assist in designing the survey and analysing the results. Examples of such surveys include:

- **Stress audit:** the HSE's stress management indicator tool consists of 35 questions, and although not difficult to complete, does involve a reasonable time commitment both for those completing it and those drawing conclusions from the results. The information derived from such a survey can be invaluable, but it is important to ensure there is sufficient engagement and support from workers to ensure it success.

Case study

“We found stress to be a really good recruiting and organising tool”.

Scott was a branch health and safety officer in a local government branch in Scotland.

“We were receiving increasing reports, from our safety reps, of members having time off with stress-related illnesses, and, most worryingly coming into work whilst demonstrating symptoms of stress, such as lack of concentration and arguing with colleagues. There was also an increase in cases of bullying by people who you would not normally be associated with such behaviour. However management refused to acknowledge there was a problem, and that there was sufficient evidence to

justify diverting resources to a problem they did not believe existed.

“We decided the best thing to do was to take up the challenge and show them the evidence. We did our own survey using the HSE’s Stress Management Indicator Tool, and used the “traffic light” system, with red indicating an area that management needed to address. There was an awful lot of red. When we showed the evidence management had no choice but to take us seriously.

“Alongside this work we ran a “NO! To Over Work” campaign and distributed leaflets to all our members. This helped us recruit 16 new activists.

“The net result of all this was that:

Senior management agreed to speak to managers, address any specific issues regarding their behaviour and any training required;

Roles and workloads were reviewed followed by a re-allocation of duties;

Personal development plans, giving the chance to have a say in how their role was developed in relation to the organisational changes that were taking place.

“This campaign enabled us to demonstrate that through trade unions workers can really take control of their working lives, and it also enabled us to recruit both more activists and members, and increase the union’s strength for the struggles ahead.”

- **Workplace organisation surveys:** Get workers doing similar jobs to fill out a questionnaire and discuss it together. Things you may want to include in a survey are:
 - How is work organised (numbers of workers shifts, hours worked, breaks)?
 - How is the work done, what tasks are involved and equipment or tools used?

- What are the hazards?
- What measures are being taken to prevent or reduce the hazard, and what else can be done?

Body mapping: This exercise consists of two simple outlines of a body, showing front and back, on which workers are, often using a variety of coloured pens or other markers, asked to indicate an injury, pain or illness caused by their work. Each colour could denote a type of injury, e.g. red musculoskeletal injury, yellow stress related. In some cases you may feel colour coding is unnecessary. With or without it, body mapping is an excellent way of engaging members in discussions about identifying and tackling the causes of workplace injury and illness.

Hazards mapping: Similar to the above, but with a map of the workplace showing workstations, furniture, storage areas, doors, windows, machinery and equipment. Colour coding could be used to denote the type of hazards. The groups of hazards you may want to consider are:

- physical injuries from trips, falls and accidents
- environmental, eg temperature, noise, lighting, radiation
- chemical (dusts, liquids, gases)
- biological (infection, needles)
- ergonomic and musculoskeletal (posture, manual handling etc.)
- psychosocial (stress, bullying)
- workplace organisation (shifts patterns, workloads and schedules).

Campaigning tools

Detailed advice on the sort of campaign tools your branch can use is to be found in the UNISON guide “Effective Campaigning” (see appendix 2). This provides advice on lobbying, presentation skills, building alliances, attracting media publicity and use of electronic and social media. It is strongly recommended that anyone organising a campaign reads this guide.

The advances in new technology means there have never been more tools available to choose from when trying to get your message across. Social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook certainly make it easier to relay your message quickly to large numbers of people. This equally means there have never been more people and organisations competing for your audience’s attention, so you need to make sure that your postings and messages are the ones that stand out. They should be as short and to the point as possible focussing on the key messages you want to communicate to your members and, where appropriate, wider audience. It also important to remember that any messages, using sites such as Facebook and Twitter, you send out can be read and used by friend and foe alike, so it is important that their content cannot be used to undermine the union. Reading the UNISON guide will help you overcome these obstacles.

UNISON has created its own social media site called the “Organising Space”. This is reserved for and can only be accessed by UNISON activists. It provides a space where activists can freely exchange views and share their organising and campaigning experiences. See Appendix 2 for details.

There is no substitute for talking to people, and because of your rights and functions as a safety rep you will have more opportunities than most to meet people on a one-to-one basis through, for example, your health and safety inspections. You can combine the new with the traditional. For example when going about the workplace, you can take with you a calling card or leaflet to publicise your web site and social media accounts. If you are holding a workplace meeting you can use social media to advertise it.

Using health and safety to raise UNISON’s profile in the private, community and voluntary sectors

The fragmentation and privatisation of public services has meant that increasingly UNISON is recruiting and organising in workplace and sectors where either they previously had weak organising structures, and in some cases, not even recognition agreements. Although they present considerable difficulties and challenges, they also offer the best opportunities for increasing UNISON’s membership and organising strength, and health and safety can help in achieving this. The law says that employers must consult with their workforce on issues related to their health and safety. The best and easiest way for employers to meet this legal obligation is through recognising trade unions and allowing their workers to appoint trade union safety reps.

Trade union safety reps, unlike non trade union employee reps, have access to training through their trade union, providing expertise and skills that smaller employers in particular may not have, compared to their larger counterparts.

Case study

“Health and safety has enabled us to organise in workplaces which otherwise we could never have reached”.

Josephine works as branch manager for a housing association branch based in London.

“A couple of years ago we started to plan and look at ways of using health and safety as an organising tool in our branch.

“Our branch covers a number of employers, including some where we don’t even have any recognition agreements. In addition terms and conditions are negotiated locally with each

individual employer which poses a challenge when campaigning nationally or regionally on such issues.

“Also workers, unless they have faced a personal situation such as a redundancy, may not see trade unions as important. And when they do need us, because we haven't had the opportunity to organise, there is only a limited amount we can do to help them. However health and safety affects everyone and enables the union to organise in workplaces we otherwise couldn't reach.

“The first issue we focussed on was the risk of workplace violence. This issue affects a wide spectrum of our branch's membership including care home staff, rent collectors, staff working with the homeless and in residential projects, and with people who have drug and alcohol addiction issues. The service users themselves may have a history of violent behaviour, and may also bring our members into contact with other people who do. Added to all this many of our members work alone or in isolated environments with little support of back-up. Violence at work truly is an issue that affects all our members

“We started off with a “bite size” training day on violence at work. This was attended not only by safety reps and stewards, but also members who although not holding any position within the union, were interested in the issue and becoming more active. Some of these have gone on to become fully trained safety reps.

“We also successfully won compensation awards for three members working in a care home. This was publicised through blogs, facebook, twitter, and the web (both the branch and national UNISON sites). The employer in question did not recognise trade unions. By taking this action we sought to highlight the benefits to workers of union membership, and the costs to employers of not recognising unions. In addition by recognising UNISON and our safety reps, employers may stop these dreadful incidents happening in the first place, which not only protects the health of our members, but saves money through avoiding costly legal actions.

“Following the success of our campaign on violence we are looking to follow this up in other areas and have organised “bite size” training days on safety inspections and well-being”.

In some cases UNISON has been able to work constructively with employers to raise awareness of health and safety, whilst at the same time increasing UNISON's profile.

However UNISON has also used health and safety to put pressure on employers to come to the negotiating table.

Case study

“UNISON calling”

UNISON used health and safety to increase its profile in call centres, particularly those in the energy sector. It commissioned a research survey of call centre staff asking them a range of questions on health and safety issues including shift-working, workstation design, toilet breaks and noise in the workplace.

UNISON then drew up a “Call Centre Charter” for energy companies to sign up to, which included a checklist of features and standards that any decent UK call centre should comply with. This included:

- well designed workplaces and workstations
- toilet breaks and sufficient breaks away from their workstation
- fair and transparent sickness absence procedures
- stress management policies
- training and procedures for dealing with offensive calls.

This work increased UNISON's standing with energy companies and its' organising profile with members and potential members. For more details of this work read “UNISON calling” (see appendix 2).

Case study

“The health and safety issues helped us in our campaign for a living wage and trade union recognition”

The cleaning staff of a well known university were contracted out to Outsourced Cleaning Services who employed 80 cleaners on the site. There is no formal recognition agreement but UNISON reps at the university had been campaigning on the cleaners' behalf on a number of issues.

The branch was campaigning both for union recognition, and a living wage for Outsourced Cleaning Services' staff employed in cleaning the university.

It was then brought to the branch's attention that only a fixed number of the cleaners were being provided with adequate footwear to clean up spills of often noxious liquids.

The UNISON rep said “It was ridiculous really. The staff weren't exactly asking for much, just some decent wellington boots. The cleaning company were expecting the cleaners to share one pair between them! However what we then did was to organise an online petition, which we circulated through social media, and also produced a flyer highlighting the footwear issue, and linking to the claim for a living wage.

“The university public relations team got hold of it, and frankly I think were embarrassed to find out that the university's cleaners were not even getting the right footwear.”

A few days later the cleaning company not only conceded in providing the correct footwear, but also a living wage.

Commenting on the two successes the UNISON rep said:

“The issue over the wellington boots I think helped us with the living wage claim, in that it highlighted the poor conditions that these cleaners were working under.

“Both successes showed what a union can do even without full recognition. Discussions are now taking place with the cleaning company regarding getting full recognition, and over half of the cleaners have now signed up as UNISON members.”

Further tips on how to get UNISON recognition in your workplace are available from the UNISON website (see Appendix 2)

Let us know what you are doing!

UNISON always wants to know what you are doing and there have been never been more ways for enabling you to make this happen. You can let us know through:

- Email at healthandsafety@unison.co.uk
- UNISON Organising Space health and safety community <https://organisingspace.unison.org.uk/OS/>
- Twitter https://twitter.com/UNISON_HS
- Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/UNISONHS>

APPENDIX 1:

Branch checklist

- ensure every workplace is covered by at least one safety rep
- try to ensure your reps are proportionate to your membership in terms of gender, race and age. In particular UNISON needs to prioritise recruiting more women and younger members
- make sure any new safety reps get the training they require
- if you already have trade union recognition make your employer has a joint health and safety committee
- consult with members on issues of concern
- report back to members when the committee meets and what it is discussing
- identify health and safety campaigns that have clearly defined objectives, are achievable and relevant to members' working lives
- celebrate your successes, however small. Remember even small successes can mean to member's working life, and show why trade unions matter.

Safety rep checklist

- ideally every workplace should be inspected at least at least four times per year. Where workplaces have not had one in the last year make sure that one is carried as soon as is reasonably practicable;
- use these inspections, and the other legally protected functions of safety reps, to initiate as many conversations with members as possible
- remember members will often be the experts on health and safety in immediate workplaces, so make sure you listen to what they have to say
- let your branch know of any successes however small
- each safety rep should aim to recruit at least one additional safety rep each year.

APPENDIX 2: FURTHER INFORMATION

Information on safety reps and their rights

- Health and safety: a guide for UNISON Safety Reps (stock number 1684*)
- Safety representatives and safety committees (brown book) (stock number 1819*)
- Health and safety – you have the right to... (stock number 1029*)

Health and safety inspections and risk assessments

- Health and safety inspections at work (stock number 1939*)
- Risk assessment: a guide for UNISON reps (stock number 1351*)
- Get help: hazard reporting**
- Get help: risk assessment**

Other relevant UNISON guides and websites

- Gender safety and health (stock number 1982)
- Stress at work: a guide for UNISON safety reps (stock number 1725)
- General campaigning, negotiating and organising guides
- Working with local communities to fight cuts and privatisation: a practical guide (stock number 3006*)
- Effective campaigning: a unison guide (stock number 2916*)

- Starting the conversation: a quick guide to conducting conversation with potential recruits (unison.org.uk/get-involved/learning-development/activists/recruiting-members/starting-the-conversation/)
- Recruitment: a quick guide to recruiting members (unison.org.uk/get-involved/learning-development/activists/organising-collective-action/recruitment/)
- Get members to recruit (unison.org.uk/get-involved/learning-development/activists/recruiting-members/get-members-to-recruit/)
- UNISON calling: a guide to organising in call centres (stock number 3111)
- Learning for you: <http://www.unison.org/get-involved/learning-development>
- UNISON organising space <https://organisingpace.unison.org.uk/os/login.aspx>
- Securing recognition in a workplace <https://www.unison.org.uk/get-involved/learning-development/activists/securing-recognition>

* = publications available through the UNISON online catalogue (unison.org.uk/get-involved/in-your-workplace/key-documents-tools-activists/online-catalogue/)

** = publications available through UNISON Get Help (unison.org.uk/get-help/)

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