

# Health and Safety – The Basics

A guide for new UNISON safety reps



## Preface

So now you are a UNISON safety rep, what next?

Well, this guide takes you through your rights and role as a safety rep. It also introduces you to some of the main health and safety laws and hazards (something which may cause or lead to harm) likely to be relevant to your role and to your members. Where appropriate, it points you to other sources of further information and support.



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## Introduction

UNISON believes that everyone should be able to work without suffering harm to their health and safety. However, this is not the case for far too many. Each year in the UK, it is estimated that up to 50,000 people are killed by work. Every year around two million people are either made ill or more ill because of their work.

These are huge numbers. Yet work does not have to make people ill. Bad working practices and poor safety are the cause.

UNISON takes health and safety very seriously which is why we aim to have at least one UNISON safety rep to cover every workplace where we have members. Union safety reps and joint health and safety committees (covered later in this guide) can reduce the levels of serious injuries by 50%. So the position of safety rep is one of the most important in the union.

Safety reps have specific functions and rights which are supported by the law, mostly the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations (often referred to as the Brown Book or shortened to the SRSC). The rest of this guide will explain in more detail your role as a safety rep and what you are entitled to. Towards the end, there is a brief introduction to some of the main laws and workplace hazards that UNISON members suffer.

Health and safety also provides UNISON with campaigning, organising and recruiting opportunities. The legally supported functions of safety reps allows them unique opportunities to represent and campaign on the health and safety issues that matter to our members. The savage cuts suffered by the Health Safety Executive (HSE) and local authorities (the two main bodies for enforcing health and safety law) means that more than ever, UNISON safety reps have a role to play in proactively supporting the interests of our members.

## Why we need safety reps

Health and safety must not be left to the employer or even 'safety professionals'. This is supported by research which shows that health and safety is worse where it is left to management, with safety reps often being more informed. Where employers acknowledge health and safety, if they are not blaming employees, then they are usually looking at it in terms of reducing absenteeism and preventing compensation claims. Reducing harm is less likely to be a consideration. Employers often make decisions on whether to reduce a risk (the chance of harm) based on money rather than the health or safety of their workers. And even the most enlightened manager won't have all the answers or even be aware of all of the problems.

Compared to a union safety rep representing the workers' interest, safety professionals may also differ in their approach to health and safety. While they may usefully advise on specialist areas, they may lack practical knowledge about a particular workplace, task, or how the job is actually done.

An employer's internal safety adviser may also not have all the answers, nor be aware of all the problems. They may also be hampered by their role as an adviser to the employer.

So union safety reps have an invaluable role to play not only in getting the experiences and problems suffered by members raised and dealt with, but also in ensuring that the employer takes a proactive worker-focused approach to tackling work related hazards.

### **Branch health and safety officers**

As well as workplace health and safety reps, each branch will have a health and safety officer. This is a branch officer who is responsible for health and safety across the branch. They will act as a link between you as a safety rep and the rest of the branch, co-ordinate the activities of all safety reps, give information and support, and co-ordinate branch-wide campaigns.

If you do not have the contact details of your branch health and safety officer or branch secretary, call 0845 355 0845 and ask to be put in touch with your branch.

## Appointing a health and safety rep

As a safety rep you are appointed by UNISON, not your employer. Your UNISON branch will decide what arrangements it will make for appointing safety reps, but ideally there should be at least one safety rep for each workplace or work group. There is no limit on how many may be appointed, but this may be something negotiated between your branch and the employer.

Often safety reps are elected in the same way as stewards, but in some branches the stewards and safety reps are the same people. What is important is to ensure that all members know who their safety rep is and that all safety reps are aware of what their role involves. The aim should be to have enough safety reps and stewards (separately or in a combined role) so that they are not overwhelmed.

The SRSC regulations state that a safety rep usually needs to be employed in the workplace where they carry out their role and, in most cases, should have at least two years' employment with their present, or a similar, employer.

Once a safety rep is appointed, the employer must be notified in writing of that appointment.

Where other unions are recognised and have sufficient membership, a UNISON branch may wish to consider joint working arrangements with them.

## What does a health and safety rep do?

As a safety rep, you have certain legal rights or functions under the Safety Representatives and

Safety Committee Regulations (the SRSC or the Brown Book). These include:

- representing members to the employer or in consultation with health and safety inspectors
- carrying out workplace health and safety inspections
- investigating potential hazards, complaints, and incidents
- receiving information, facilities and support from the employer or health and safety inspectors so that you can carry out your other functions
- attending joint health and safety committees (see later)
- paid time off to carry out your role as a safety rep and to undergo either TUC or union-approved training.

## Representing members

As a safety rep you have the right to represent your members in consultation with health and safety inspectors and to the employer on any matter relating to their health, safety, or welfare. You also have the right to be consulted in good time by your employer on:

- the introduction of any measures which might substantially affect the health and safety of the employees you represent
- any health and safety information they provide to employees
- the planning and organisation of any health and safety training provided to the employees
- the health and safety consequences of the introduction of new technology
- the arrangements for appointing or nominating competent people (that is the employer's health and safety advisers).

You have the right to ask for any information you need to fulfil your functions, and this includes inspecting and taking copies of any document relevant to the health and safety of the workplace or to the employees you represent, and which the employer is required to keep. This will include information on: incidents and near-misses, hazards,

safety measures, sickness absence statistics, any change to working methods, and the risk assessments carried out (see below). There are some exceptions to your right to information including that it must not identify an individual (unless they consent). However, such information can be given in an anonymous form. Further guidance on your right to information is given in UNISON's guide for safety reps, *Health and Safety Inspections at Work* (stock no. 1939).

Members and non-members alike value UNISON's health and safety work, so representing members and the workforce in general on health and safety matters can be used as an organising and recruitment opportunity. So don't forget to advertise your successes. Further guidance on recruiting, organising, and campaigning around health and safety can be found in UNISON's guide for safety reps, *Organising for Health and Safety* (stock no. 2994).

It is also important for the purposes of consultation that non-union members are consulted. Employers are required to consult on health and safety with all workers. However, if the union safety reps cover all workers for consultation, the employer needs do no more than consult with those safety reps. If however, non-members are not covered by a union safety rep, then the employer has to make separate arrangements which can include arranging for other representation.

However, if a non-member approaches you with concerns, they should be asked to join UNISON. Even if they do not join, the issue raised may be a risk to members so you may still want to raise it in a general way with management. If a member raises a concern, they should be given individual support and advice, and there may be an opportunity to ask them if they would like to get more involved by becoming a safety rep, steward, or even as a first step, an informal contact.

## Inspections and investigations

You have a legal right to inspect all the workplace areas you cover at least once every three months, but it may be agreed with the employer that these are carried out more frequently in particularly high

risk or changing circumstances. You are entitled to make additional inspections if, since the last inspection, there has been a substantial change in the conditions of work, or if new information on hazards relevant to the workplace has been published by the HSE.

Routine inspections must be notified in advance to the employer, and your branch may already have an agreed programme, so first check with your branch safety officer.

The aim of inspections is to identify hazards and problems and report these to management. Management still have a responsibility to do risk assessments, which are more detailed and should aim to go further by taking steps to prevent or minimise the chance of any harm occurring.

You also have a right to inspect and carry out an investigation if there has been a notifiable incident, disease, or dangerous occurrence, as listed under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR – see later). It must be safe to do so, no evidence should be removed or destroyed, and if possible, notice should be given to the employer. Particularly serious incidents should be left untouched until the enforcing authority has inspected, and you should notify the branch health and safety officer and regional officer as soon as possible.

All incidents or 'near-misses' should be recorded in the accident book.

Inspections are a good way of meeting and getting to know members and potential members, and of raising the profile of UNISON safety reps. So when carrying out an inspection, always have some recruitment application forms with you for both becoming a member and becoming a safety rep. And again, don't forget to advertise your successes.

Further guidance on inspections is given in UNISON's guide for safety reps, *Health and Safety Inspections at Work* (stock no. 1939).

## **Time off**

As a safety rep you have the right to paid time off during working hours as necessary to carry out your role and functions and to undergo either TUC or union-approved training. There is no limit on the amount of time - it will depend on the type of workplace, the number of members you cover, and how you fulfil your duties. Your branch may have negotiated a time off agreement for safety reps with the employer, so check with your branch safety officer or branch secretary.

You should not be denied paid time off, so if you are, notify your branch health and safety officer or branch secretary immediately. However, your employer may ask you to delay your training (see below).

## **Facilities**

Your employer must provide any facilities and assistance you may reasonably need in your role as a safety rep. This may include space for private discussion if necessary, possibly a separate room or desk, a filing cabinet, and access to office facilities such as a phone, photocopier, computer and a health and safety notice board. Your employer is also required to give reasonable assistance if you are investigating an accident.

Your branch may have negotiated a facilities agreement with the employer for safety reps, so again please check with your branch safety officer.

## **Training**

To help you carry out your role effectively, it is very important that you get trained as soon as possible after you take up your appointment. If you are already a steward but have now also become a safety rep, you will still need to get trained.

Remember, you are entitled, by law, to time off with pay to get trained by your union on health and safety issues. However, you do have to give your employer reasonable notice and, if requested, a copy of the syllabus. Your employer may ask you to attend the course at another time, because of the needs of the service. If this happens, try to agree a future date when you will attend. If your employer keeps asking you to delay attending, speak to your branch safety

officer or branch secretary. Some employers will try to get safety reps to agree to attend employer-organised courses instead of union ones. While some employer-run training can be useful, it is not a substitute for trade union training.

There are a number of UNISON and TUC courses available for safety reps and further details of these are available from UNISON's Learning and Organising Services Department ([unison.org.uk/laos/](http://unison.org.uk/laos/)). You may also seek advice from your branch safety officer or union learning rep.

## Negotiating with your employer

You may have to negotiate with management on health and safety issues. For those relating to a single workplace or that are urgent, it might be appropriate to raise them with the line manager for that workplace. Some issues may be appropriate for the formal negotiating procedure agreed between your employer and branch, and your branch secretary will be able to give you further details. Some items may be referred to the joint health and safety committee (see below).

There will be some overlap, for example an urgent issue may need to be raised with the employer immediately and then be reviewed by the safety committee at a later date. Other issues may be referred by the joint negotiating committee to the safety committee, and possibly vice-versa.

If you are raising an issue with your line manager you may still want to chat to the branch safety officer or branch secretary first, as many problems affect all the workplaces covered by the branch, and they may not be aware of the problem, or alternatively, any solutions which you agree could have implications for other workplaces.

If an issue is being pursued through the negotiating procedures, or is raised at the safety committee, then this will be done as part of a team, which will probably include the branch health and safety officer.

You will certainly get involved in discussions with management following any inspections or if members raise any health and safety issues specific to your workplace. When this happens:

- remember to consult and inform the UNISON members affected before discussions with management, during negotiation, and before any agreement
- set clear objectives
- know your rights
- listen as well as speak
- do not personalise issues
- ensure that the branch is aware of important negotiations and ask for support if necessary.

## Talking to members and others

Members will look to you to tell them what the union is doing on health and safety, to listen to and deal with their problems, and to consult and involve them.

The first step is to ensure that everyone knows that you are the safety rep and how to contact you. Use the UNISON safety reps noticeboard card for this. If your employer displays the HSE's Health and Safety Law poster, make sure your name is on this as well (they either have to display this poster, or give every member of staff an appropriate HSE leaflet which acts as an alternative).

It is important to keep in touch with members. Most contact will be informal – during conversation in work time or at meal breaks, for example. It is important to encourage them to come to you whenever they have a health and safety worry or an issue they wish to discuss. If it is not a health and safety issue, refer them to the relevant rep, perhaps their steward or a particular branch officer.

If you are responsible for people who you have very little social contact with, such as people who work different hours, or work in isolated locations, ensure that you contact them regularly as well.

Some people may feel shy or nervous about raising problems, and some may not always recognise that what they see as a personal problem is in fact a trade union issue. This is particularly likely to be the case with instances of stress or bullying. It may also be the case that a member may not feel comfortable discussing something with you if for example you are a different sex. So it is useful to be able to find someone else that they could talk to, such as the

branch women's officer or the branch lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender officer for example.

Members need to know what is happening in the union. Order relevant health and safety leaflets and distribute them to members or, if this is not possible, pin them up on notice boards along with relevant health and safety posters. It is also a good idea to publish your successes, within the workplace and to other safety reps. Good news stories, even if they seem minor issues, show you are doing a good job and help to build confidence in the union, both among members and non-members.

You also need to keep in touch with other safety reps and the branch, by attending any meetings organised. This way you will get an idea of what is happening elsewhere, build up a useful network of contacts, receive support, and discuss branch wide issues.

## Campaigning

Being a safety rep is more than just about carrying out your roles to inspect the workplace and investigate accidents, and the other functions as listed in the Brown Book. It is also about campaigning to achieve change.

Health and safety is an important area for campaigning. There are health and safety hazards in all kinds of workplaces. It is not just the obvious hazards like machinery or dangerous chemicals that are a problem. There are many hidden hazards and bad working practices that can cause serious injury or ill-health. A lot of so-called 'low risk' workplaces still contain many and serious risks to workers, including stress, back pain and repetitive strain injury (RSI). Slips and trips is the biggest health and safety reason for sickness absence.

You will need to identify clearly what issues you want to campaign on. It has to be an issue which is going to have the support of your members and which is likely to achieve some change. You could:

- choose an issue identified by UNISON nationally so you can use national materials in support of your campaign

- choose an issue, which has already been identified by your branch or members as a priority health and safety concern
- choose an issue identified as a priority by the HSE
- use a new or revised guide from the HSE or UNISON to campaign around.

Whatever issue you choose it is important that your campaign has its roots in the workplace where your members work. You can establish what health and safety issues are of concern to your members by:

- carrying out a survey or risk mapping exercise to identify issues of concern (for further information on mapping, see UNISON's guide, Organising for Health and Safety – stock no. 2994)
- inspecting sickness absence statistics and the accident book reports to see if a pattern of ill-health or injury emerges
- considering the problems you have identified during your workplace inspections.

Further advice on campaigning, including a checklist for an effective campaign can be found in the UNISON guide Effective Campaigning (stock no. 2916).

## Recruitment and organising

Recruitment is an important and key task for safety reps. Health and safety is one of the main reasons that people give for joining and staying in a union and a union is stronger the more members it has. When carrying out your role as a safety rep, always take the opportunity to ask non-members to join UNISON. What affects one member, is also likely to affect other members, and also non-members. So health and safety needs to be seen as a collective issue and is an opportunity to identify potential new members and new reps.

Safety reps and stewards should work together to ensure that all potential members join UNISON. This simple checklist will help you:

- find out who the members and potential members are

- emphasise UNISON's record on promoting health, safety, and welfare to non-members and encourage other UNISON members to do the same
- be prepared to give reasons why a non-member should join UNISON and to answer the question 'what can UNISON do for me?'
- stress UNISON is run for and by its members
- always have a supply of local and national recruitment literature, membership application forms, and political fund leaflets readily available
- ensure your details as a safety rep are displayed on appropriate notice boards, along with other health and safety information, including success stories
- publicise and promote the union's work, campaigns, and achievements, not only on health and safety but in other areas as well.

Further advice and materials on recruitment are available from UNISON. Health and safety related recruitment materials can be found on the UNISON health and safety webpage at [unison.org.uk/safety/index.asp](http://unison.org.uk/safety/index.asp). Once there, simply type in the word "recruitment" in the "health and safety document search" engine. More general recruitment materials and advice can be downloaded from [unison.org.uk/recruitment/index.asp](http://unison.org.uk/recruitment/index.asp). Both can be ordered from UNISON's online catalogue at [unison.org.uk/resources/index.asp](http://unison.org.uk/resources/index.asp).

## Joint health and safety committees

You will probably already have a safety committee covering your employer – if not you should have one. The law says that every employer if requested in writing by at least two safety reps, must establish a safety committee within three months of the request.

The employer must consult with the safety reps making the request and with reps of any other recognised trade unions. They must also post a notice prominently, stating the composition of the committee and the work areas that it covers.

The HSE's guidance states that working out the size, shape and terms of reference of a safety committee must depend on discussion and agreement with the recognised unions.

The role and objectives of safety committees will depend on the nature of the workplace but usually will include:

- analysing accidents, ill-health and disease trends, plus safety, accident and inspection reports
- developing safety rules, policies and procedures
- reviewing safety training
- advising on safety communications and publicity.

On the membership of committees the HSE's guidance recommends that:

- they should be compact
- there should be 50/50 management and union representation
- safety advisors, doctors and other safety professionals should also sit on the committee, although in an advisory capacity.

A senior person with managerial health and safety responsibility should also be present, and be named in the employers health and safety policy as the person responsible. This person must have sufficient seniority and status to be able to represent the employer fully.

In some branches all safety reps will sit on the safety committee, in others only some will. Other unions may also be represented. Either way, safety reps should meet together before safety committee meetings to discuss the agenda and what they hope to achieve at the safety committee.

The effectiveness of safety committees depends on how well they function and whether trade unions can actually negotiate improvements. One of the most frustrating experiences for any safety rep is to be part of a badly organised and ineffective safety committee. Safety reps should ensure their committees have the power to improve health and safety and are not used by employers just as a way to avoid taking any action.

However do not always depend on just using the safety committee. Urgent issues must be dealt with immediately, and then referred to and reviewed by the safety committee. The branch may also decide to raise some health and safety issues with the employer through the negotiating machinery such as a joint negotiating committee.

## Use of enforcement agencies

If your employer breaks the law by not providing a safe and healthy workplace, remember that, if all else fails, you can always contact the enforcement agencies. However, this should always be seen as a last resort and, unless it is an emergency, it should be discussed with your branch health and safety officer or branch secretary first.

UNISON believes that most health and safety issues are negotiating issues between the union and the employer and outside bodies should only be brought in when negotiations have failed and the law is being broken.

Your workplace will be covered by either the HSE or the local authority for enforcing most health and safety law. Fire safety law is enforced by the fire authorities.

If a safety inspector visits your workplace they should contact you and provide you with their report, survey result, and information relating to warnings and notices that they have given to the employer.

The enforcement agencies have three main systems of ensuring that employers take action. These are improvement notices, prohibition notices, and prosecutions leading to fines and imprisonment. When an inspector serves an improvement notice an employer is required to take action to put things right within a specified time. If an employer fails to comply with an improvement notice, or where an activity is an immediate danger to workers or the general public, an inspector may serve a prohibition notice. These require employers to immediately stop the activity until the problem has been rectified.

If an employer fails to comply with these notices it is an offence which can lead to a fine and/or imprisonment, but a breach may be sufficiently serious to lead straight to a prosecution.

## Legal protection of safety reps and members

The SRSC Regulations make it clear that your role and functions as a safety rep do not impose any duty or legal responsibility on you. You cannot be legally penalised if you do not carry them out. However you do have a moral responsibility to your colleagues to fulfil your role to the best of your ability. You also have the same legal duties that apply to any employee.

Safety reps and other workers who report potential threats to health and safety or deliberate attempts to cover up information on threats to health and safety may be protected as 'whistleblowers' in certain circumstances. Workers and safety reps should also not be victimised for asserting a legal right. If you think that you or a member has been unfairly treated or victimised or may be if you take a specific action, speak with your branch secretary.

## When things go wrong

A major part of UNISON's work is helping members claim compensation from their employer where they have been injured or made ill by work. Compensation claims can also show employers that ignoring health and safety issues is not a cost-effective option. Generally it has to be shown that the injury or illness was caused by work and that the employer should have prevented it.

To apply for legal assistance for a member, contact UNISON on 0845 355 0845 or ask your branch secretary for a UNISON 'PI' legal services form. Once you have completed the form, UNISON's legal section will be able to advise whether or not a claim should be pursued.

## Health and safety law

If all the law on health and safety was properly applied and fully enforced, then the UK would be a very safe place to work. However, many of the health and safety regulations are either not known about or are ignored by employers.

The following laws are the ones you are likely to come across as a safety rep. These are just very brief introductions - they are dealt with in more detail in UNISON's guide on The Health and Safety Six Pack (stock no. 1660), UNISON's guide on the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations (stock no. 1819), and various UNISON guidance on particular hazards such as asbestos or hazardous substances.

### Health and Safety at Work Act

The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) is the main piece of health and safety law. It puts a duty on employers to ensure the safety, health and welfare at work of their employees and to ensure their activities do not endanger others. It also places duties on designers, manufacturers and importers to ensure that equipment and substances are safe when used properly.

### Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977

Otherwise known as The Brown Book, or SRSC, these regulations outline the roles and rights of safety reps and safety committees (see earlier). Further detail is available in UNISON's guide, Safety Representatives and Safety Committees (stock no. 1819).

### The Health and Safety Six Pack

The six pack is a set of six regulations all introduced at the end of 1992. Some have been amended, others have been re-introduced. They are:

- **The Display Screen Equipment Regulations** – cover users of computers and some other display screens. They require employers to carry out assessments of the workstations, meet certain standards and provide breaks, eye tests and training.

- **The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (now 1999)** – require employers to have systems to properly manage and ensure health and safety, including conducting risk assessments (see later).
- **The Manual Handling Operations Regulations** – again by risk assessing (see later) hazardous manual handling tasks, employers are required to remove the risk of harm by removing the need for lifting, pushing, pulling and moving activities wherever possible by automating the tasks, or reducing the risk through other means such as the use of trolleys and making loads lighter.
- **The Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations** – require employers to provide suitable personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers when other safety measures still leave a risk of harm. PPE must be provided free to workers.
- **The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations** – cover all equipment, not just industrial machinery, but also photocopiers, knives, computers, etc. They must be suitable for the job, safe and maintained.
- **The Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations** – specify minimum requirements for workplaces including on ventilation, temperature, cleanliness, space, lighting, toilets, washing facilities, drinking water, rest rooms and meal facilities.

These six pack regulations and their accompanying codes of practice or guidance are dealt with in much greater detail in UNISON's guide, The Health and Safety Six Pack (stock no. 1660).

### CHIP

The Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 2009 or CHIP 4 – require suppliers of dangerous chemicals to identify their hazards (dangers), to give this information to their customers (usually by means of a label on the package), and to package the chemical safely.

## COSHH

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 cover dangerous chemicals and other dangerous substances. They require employers to conduct a risk assessment, control the hazard, and give workers information and training. Where possible any hazard should be prevented by using a safe or safer alternative substance or a process which doesn't require its use.

## REACH

This is an EU regulation on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and restriction of Chemicals. This 2007 regulation applies to suppliers of a dangerous substance or mixture and requires them to supply a safety data sheet (SDS) to their customers. SDSs identify the substance, its hazards, ingredients, appropriate first aid and fire-fighting measures, what to do if there is an accidental release, how it should be stored, handled, and transported, its properties, stability, any exposure controls, etc.

## RIDDOR

The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 state that employers must report to the HSE, and keep a record of work-related deaths and specific work-related injuries, diseases, and dangerous occurrences. The HSE uses these reports to decide if it needs to investigate a particular incident, and to decide more broadly if it needs to produce or review the law or guidance on a particular issue.

## Risk assessment

One of the most important things you have to know about as a safety rep is risk assessment. This is a simple concept for employers to identify what hazards may exist in or from the work their employees do, and how likely these hazards are to cause harm to those workers or others. Employers are expected to take reasonable measures to prevent the risk of harm occurring, or otherwise control and minimise the risks as far as is reasonable.

The employer's main duty to risk assess is under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, but there are also duties to carry out assessments under other regulations which apply to specific hazards including computers and other display screens, manual handling, and chemicals and other hazardous substances (see earlier section).

While risk assessments are the responsibility of the employer, as a safety rep you should be consulted on its undertaking and the results. Your job is to make sure that the risk assessments are completed, cover all the likely hazards, and that measures are taken to prevent or control and minimise any risks identified. Some employers try to rig the assessments to show that there is not a problem and that they therefore do not need to do anything.

More detailed guidance on how you as a safety rep can decide whether your employers risk assessments are good enough can be found in UNISON's guide, Risk Assessment (stock no. 1351).

## A few workplace issues

The following is just a brief introduction to some of the workplace health and safety issues faced by UNISON members. More detailed information is available in UNISON's guidance on these various hazards.

### Asbestos

While the new use of asbestos or asbestos containing materials is now (with few exceptions) illegal, the previous widespread and varied use of asbestos means that it is still found in many workplaces, especially those built or refurbished between 1950 and the mid-1980s.

It is not always easy to identify or know where it is, but breathing in asbestos dust and fibres can lead to fatal illnesses.

Employers must manage the asbestos and associated risks within their buildings to prevent exposure, including identifying where it is, planning building works and giving staff appropriate information, training, and instruction.

For further advice, see UNISON's information sheet on asbestos (available from the UNISON Health and Safety website).

## **Bullying**

Bullying at work can be defined as persistent offensive, intimidating, humiliating behaviour, which attempts to undermine an individual or group of employees. It can take many forms, and should not be tolerated. It affects productivity, can seriously harm the victim and has led to suicides. Employers should risk assess bullying at work just like any other hazard. They should also have appropriate policies and procedures, and support for those who are bullied.

Further advice is available in UNISON's guide, *Tackling Bullying at Work* (stock no. 1281).

## **Manual handling**

Manual handling "accidents" cause a significant number of workers to suffer the agony of back pain. Sometimes the damage can lead to a member being incapacitated for weeks, or even for life, possibly with the risk of losing their job. Anyone can suffer a back injury if they lift a load wrongly, that is too heavy, if the weight shifts, or if the lifting is repeated regularly.

One of the most common causes of back injuries for UNISON members is lifting people; a major hazard for homecare, healthcare and some residential workers.

Employers should remove the risk of harm from manual handling by removing the need for lifting, pushing, pulling and moving activities wherever possible by automating the process, or reducing the risk through other means such as the use of trolleys and making loads lighter. Hazardous manual handling tasks should be risk assessed.

For further advice, see UNISON's guide to *The Health and Safety Six Pack* (stock no. 1660), and UNISON's information sheet, *Back Pain – Musculoskeletal Disorder* (available from the UNISON Health and Safety website).

## **Repetitive strain injury**

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) is a serious issue

covering a wide range of injuries to muscles, tendons and nerves. RSI can be caused or made worse by work demanding awkward or repeated movements, the need to repeatedly apply pressure, and badly designed equipment, workstations or systems of work. Pain, swelling, numbness, and a loss of use may be experienced.

RSI can be prevented if employers design jobs so that they fit workers rather than the other way around. This may involve changing work practices, providing suitable breaks, and adapting or replacing equipment.

For further advice on RSI, see UNISON's information sheet, *Repetitive Strain Injury* (available from the UNISON Health and Safety website).

## **Stress**

Stress occurs when, in trying to cope with the tasks, responsibilities, or other types of pressure from work, these demands or pressures become excessive, causing difficulty, strain, or worry. Stress is one of the biggest health issues at work today, damaging the physical or mental health of workers. Stress can be caused by a number of issues, and the HSE has identified particular risk factors and produced guidance for employers. The risk of stress should be assessed in the same way as other hazards.

UNISON has taken court cases against employers who have failed to take action to protect members from stress, but no amount of compensation can really make up for the terrible damage done. Further advice on stress can be found in UNISON's guide, *Stress at Work* (stock no. 1725).

## **Violence**

Violence, the threat of violence and verbal abuse are a major issue for many UNISON members. The HSE has identified certain risk factors where it is more likely, including jobs that provide care to vulnerable people, enforce the law, or involve working alone or handling drugs or money.

Violence is not, and never can be, 'part of the job'. Employers must assess the risk of violence in exactly the same way as for any other hazard. The risk of

violence must be prevented where possible or otherwise minimised as far as possible.

Further guidance is available in UNISON's guide, It's Not Part of the Job (stock no. 1346).

## Getting Help

The hazards covered above are just some of the most frequent health and safety concerns experienced by UNISON members. However don't worry, UNISON provides some of the leading trade union guidance on health and safety hazards.

### Guidance and other materials

Most of our general health and safety materials, including those for recruitment are available on the web at [unison.org.uk/safety](http://unison.org.uk/safety). Some job or sector specific materials are produced by and available from the relevant national department or their website. Items such as guides, leaflets, and posters can also be ordered by contacting stock orders, either by the online catalogue at [unison.org.uk/resources/index.asp](http://unison.org.uk/resources/index.asp) or by email to [stockorders@unison.co.uk](mailto:stockorders@unison.co.uk).

For email orders you will need to state the document title and stock number, the quantity required, your name, your branch name and number, your telephone number, and full postal address.

General recruitment materials can be found on the UNISON recruitment webpage at [unison.org.uk/recruitment/index.asp](http://unison.org.uk/recruitment/index.asp) or downloaded or ordered from UNISON's online catalogue.

Other useful guidance can be found on the websites of Hazards Magazine, the TUC, and the HSE. You can find links to these from our website at [unison.org.uk/safety](http://unison.org.uk/safety).

### Newsletter and other communications

UNISON sends regular health and safety email bulletins and newsletters to our safety reps and branch safety officers. To get on the mailing list you need to be identified on UNISON's membership database (RMS) as a health and safety rep (or branch health and safety officer as appropriate), and it should also include your current email address.

If you are not identified as a safety rep on RMS or are not sure, speak with your branch. Your UNISON region will update this information on you once instructed by your branch. Your branch will normally do this by completing the appropriate form.

We want to share your experiences and successes. So if you have a case study, an example of good practice, or a local campaign or story to share; email UNISON's Health and Safety Unit at [healthandsafety@unison.co.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@unison.co.uk), or write to UNISON Health and Safety Unit  
UNISON Centre  
130 Euston Road  
London  
NW1 2AY.

### Specific help and advice

If you have any specific problems where you need help or advice, your branch health and safety officer or branch secretary may be able to assist. If they are unable to help you then they may pass on your query to a regional officer, who may in turn contact UNISON's Health and Safety Unit.

And do not forget UNISON's phone line service specially dedicated to providing an information and advice service for members. It can be contacted on 0845 355 0845.

You are not alone in UNISON. We are here to give you the information and support that you need to carry out your role. Good luck in your new role.



**Three simple ways to join UNISON today  
and get essential cover wherever you work**



**Join online at  
[joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org)**



**Call us on  
0800 171 2193**



**Ask your UNISON rep  
for an application form**