

## ➤ Health and safety in the workplace

### The role of unions in the workplace



Unions represent the interests of their members, whether they are nurses, teachers, care assistants or cleaners. A trade union such as UNISON is set into a national structure with local branches, which have locally elected officials.

Typical issues the union involves itself with are:

- \* Pay discussions. Average earnings are 8% higher in trade union workplaces.
- \* Bargaining for better holidays. Average trade union members get 29 days annual leave against 23 days for non-unionised workers.
- \* Gaining compensation for those who are injured or become ill.
- \* Developing the job of Health and Safety committees.

Typical examples of UNISON's tasks are shown below:

#### (a) Caring for cleaning staff

More than 860,000 people work as cleaners in the UK and there is a higher rate of accidents among these employees than anywhere else. They work in schools, hospitals, shops and other businesses. Often little thought has been given to their Health and Safety needs.

On one occasion, UNISON was involved in a case in which cleaners were having to handle materials that were poorly labelled. In some cases, this made them unsafe to use. Discovering their concerns, the UNISON safety representative found the risks involved had not been assessed. UNISON's actions resulted in an agreement with the employers where only three cleaning chemicals would be used. Training was also given to the cleaners.

#### (b) Catering with care

Food quality, safety and hygiene are very important, but some employers don't think about the Health and Safety of those preparing and serving the food. Slips and trips in the kitchen are the main causes of accidents. High cooking temperatures, knives and heavy pots are also dangerous. UNISON branch officials work with local managers to improve the level of care in catering in schools, hospitals and elsewhere. A school catering assistant slipped on an instrument left on the floor when she was setting out tables in a dining area that also served as a classroom. She was badly injured and had to retire. UNISON's role was to ensure she was compensated and that procedures were put in place to avoid such a thing happening again.