

➤ Health and safety in the workplace

Introduction

UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK, formed when three public sector unions merged in 1993. Like all trades unions, it defends workers rights and involves itself in Health and Safety issues. Members, over two thirds of whom are women, are drawn from a variety of industries, including health, education, local government and the voluntary sector. Business success depends on employers and employees working together in partnership. UNISON works in partnership with management on Health and Safety issues. Figures show that the involvement of unions in safety reduces accidents and deaths by over 50%.

The role of unions

Trades unions represent the interests of their members. Typically, they will be involved in issues regarding pay, holidays, compensation for illness or injury and Health and Safety.

Two typical issues are:

- * Caring for cleaners. There are over 860,000 cleaning staff in the UK, and accident rates amongst them are higher than in other areas. In one case, UNISON found cleaners handling materials that were poorly labelled and could be unsafe. UNISON acted with the employer to limit the chemicals to safe ones and make sure that cleaners were properly trained.
- * Catering with care. Kitchens can be dangerous places, and accidents involving slips and trips can happen. On one occasion, UNISON gained compensation for a school catering assistant and then worked to ensure procedures were in place to prevent a similar accident re-occurring.

Health and Safety laws

The two main laws are the Health and Safety at Work Act (HASAW) and the Management of Health and Safety Regulations. These say that both employer and employee have a role. Employers should make the workplace as safe as possible. They must carry out a risk assessment and then make sure that information and training is provided to minimise risks. Employees should act in a safe and sensible manner. Health & Safety at Work legislation covers standards of care in areas such as the upkeep of the workplace, equipment and systems.

UNISON and safety

UNISON has trained representatives to help with risk assessment. It aims to have one such person in every workplace with UNISON members. They are elected by members and are more concerned with long term health and safety than immediate issues of accident prevention. They inspect for hazards and can investigate accidents and complaints.

UNISON and work issues

Three important issues that UNISON has successfully campaigned on are:

- * Women's Health and Safety - certain problems are worse for women. These include back pain, being attacked and certain injuries.
- * Violence - threats, verbal abuse and physical violence are especially a problem when people work with the public. For example, drug abusers and the mentally ill can cause problems.
- * Bullying - up to 25% of workers have been bullied. UNISON provides guidelines to deal with this, and to prevent it.

Conclusion

Employers and employees both have a responsibility for health and safety issues. UNISON works with employers to help this happen. It is chiefly concerned with long term issues of health and wellbeing and can put pressure on employers to reach these goals.