

# ‘We all have a responsibility to keep each other safe’

By **Chris Jenkinson**, UNISON regional secretary

In June 1974, a massive explosion ripped through the Nypro plant at Flixborough, near Scunthorpe.

Sadly, 28 people tragically lost their lives in the disaster, and 36 others suffered serious injuries when dangerous gas escaped from the site. It shocked the nation and led to an Act of Parliament being passed that would do more to protect our daily lives than any other.

The act was the result of diligent work by Lord Alfred Robens, a former chair of the National Coal Board.

In May 1970, Barbara Castle, secretary of state for employment and productivity, appointed Robens to chair an inquiry on workplace health and safety. The central recommendation of the resulting Robens' Report in June 1972 was that "those who create the risks are best placed to manage it".

This led to the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) 1974, taken through the House of Commons by Michael Foot, and the creation of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

At the end of the 1960s, there were 1,000 deaths at work per year in the UK and



half a million injuries; 23 million working days were lost through industrial accidents and disease.

The annual cost through lost production and resources was estimated at £200m. Something had to change.

Robens reported to Edward Heath's Conservative Government, but Labour,

elected in February 1974, took the legislation forward. In 1977, worker representation was established, with trade unions appointing safety representatives.

This year marks 50 years since the Health and Safety at Work Act received Royal Assent. All too often cursed for its misuse, it has nevertheless protected millions of British workers and driven sharp reductions in injuries and deaths at work.

In fact, since the act came onto the statute books, fatal injuries at work have dropped by almost 80 per cent, from 651 in 1974 to less than 135 today. Any death is clearly a death too many, but few can dispute that the reduction in fatalities and injuries over the past 50 years is quite remarkable.

I warmly welcome this first edition of this newsletter and hope it helps start conversations around workplace health and safety. Safety at work isn't something we should leave to other people or assume issues will magically solve themselves; we all have a responsibility to create safe working environments and keep our friends and colleagues safe.



# Court cases demonstrate the importance of health and safety at work

A number of high profile cases resulting in organisations facing heavy court fines due to health and safety law infringements show the critical importance of union representatives' work in this arena, according to Andrew Holloway, secretary to UNISON's East Midlands Regional Health and Safety Committee.

Andrew cites a number of cases where failings saw the courts penalise those responsible.

One case involved Thurlow Educational Trust which in August 2023 was fined

£80,000 under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and also ordered to pay more than £7,000 in costs when 15 schoolchildren and their teacher were injured when their classroom ceiling collapsed during a lesson. A Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation found items such as desks and chairs were stored in an unsuitable area in the school's attic.

Another school, this time in London, was fined £35,000 after a child received 45 per cent burns to their body at a carol concert. During the concert, 60 Year 3 children from

the school were waiting in costume, in a narrow corridor, holding 10-inch lit taper candles.

As they were waiting, a seven-year-old boy wearing a home-made sheep costume made out of cotton wool balls, caught fire. An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that the school had failed to take appropriate measures to account for the risks inherent with giving lit candles to children, while wearing potentially flammable costumes.

"These two cases serve to highlight the importance of everyone being vigilant about health and safety, quite often it is just a case of people thinking things through, seeing potential risks and applying some common sense to a situation," says Andrew.

"Both the incidents highlighted here could have been avoided if people had just stopped to think and consider the potential risks.

"While as a union, we have health and safety reps, I think we all need to understand that health and safety should be everyone's responsibility. Employee safety is a crucial obligation of any employer, but we also have a duty to do our bit to keep ourselves, our colleagues and any service users safe."



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# Calling all women: could you be a health and safety rep?

Only one in five union health and safety representatives are women, according to Trades Union Congress (TUC) research.

The TUC held a number of focus groups for women union reps and activists to help develop an understanding of women's experiences of health and safety in the workplace and to try to understand how unions could better help them.

A total of 100 women took place in the groups, which were held in October 2023, and raised a range of health and safety issues:

- Menopause
- Unsuitable uniforms and protective equipment
- Menstrual health
- Welfare facilities
- Personal safety
- Sexual harassment

They also discussed the role of the union safety rep, and their experience as women.

The role of safety rep, and safety committee meetings, were considered by some as 'macho' and a male-dominated space 'not especially welcoming to women colleagues'.

But many of the women safety reps involved were very proud of carrying out the role, of the difference made to members' safety, and the status that came with their union role, the TUC report concluded.

UNISON is keen to encourage more women to become involved in health and safety matters.

If you are interested in being a health and safety rep, please contact your local branch office or email us at [EastMidsSafetyTeam@unison.co.uk](mailto:EastMidsSafetyTeam@unison.co.uk)

## Most women would recommend H & S role to colleagues

More than 87 per cent of women who act as health and safety representatives for UNISON would recommend the role to their female colleagues, according to a union survey.

In December 2023, the Regional Health and Safety Committee sent an eight-question survey to all women safety reps and officers within the region.

The survey revealed that the majority of women respondents (69.2 per cent) had not faced any barriers or hurdles to becoming a health and safety rep and almost three quarters (72 per cent) did not feel they faced different challenges to their male counterparts.

In all 87.5 per cent said they would recommend a female colleague to become a UNISON health and safety rep, with 62.5 per cent saying they were either satisfied or very satisfied with carrying out the role. Only 6.25 per cent were very dissatisfied with the role.

## Raising awareness

UNISON branches, individual service groups and regional groups, activists and staff are being urged to do more to raise awareness of the work of health and safety representatives.

The union has put together a series of recommendations after the Regional Health and Safety Committee commissioned two surveys at the end of 2023: The State of the Health and Safety Network and Women Health and Safety Reps' Experience of Being a Safety Rep.

Branches are asked to build their health and safety rep network, setting out how the network works within the branch and with the employers. They are also asked to help support any new reps who take on the role.

Reps themselves are asked to promote the safety rep and officer roles to members, concentrating on any gaps in the safety network, and encouraging women, as an under-represented group, to get involved.

Branch safety reps are encouraged to meet regularly, in person and online.

Among the recommendations for service groups is for them to take an active role in discussing health and safety issues in that service group and promoting health and safety and the role of health and safety reps within those groups.

Regional groups, activists and staff should, according to the report, keep health and safety on the agenda, provide examples of the good work our reps do and ensure our reps have the tools to continue that work.



# Campaigning for an end to workplace violence

No one should expect to come to work and be assaulted or verbally abused, says senior UNISON steward Sara Evans.

Sara, a Nottinghamshire County Council UNISON representative, is among those calling for employers to sign up to the Violence at Work Charter as part of the union's campaign for an end to violence at work in public services.

"No member of staff should have to accept that they are going to be hit or abused while doing their job," says Sara, who is a member of the East Midlands UNISON Regional Health and Safety Committee and also the union's National Executive Council (NEC).

"Many of the members I represent are low paid care workers and they are often working with people whose behaviours can lead them to get agitated. This can, in turn, result in those working with them and supporting them becoming victims of assaults, abuse or threatening behaviour.



**END  
VIOLENCE  
AT WORK**

"Employers need to ensure that they are not putting their employees at risk as far as is reasonably possible. This might mean making sure all employees have adequate training for the roles they are performing and to meet the needs of those they are supporting.

"It can also involve taking into account the particular behaviours of those who are being cared for. In many of our working environments, we need to make sure we have the right staff working with the right people for the safety of everyone involved.

"Putting the wrong member of staff into a situation where they could be at risk due to

an individual's behaviour is just unacceptable. Employers have a duty of care to their staff and to make sure they have the support and training they need to do their job. They have to make workplaces as safe as possible.

"We understand that you cannot completely eradicate risk, as the people being cared for can be unpredictable, but we have to take all steps possible to avoid people getting hurt or verbally abused."

UNISON launched its Violence at Work Charter last year and is encouraging employers to sign the charter. The union defines violence at work as "Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work."

To qualify for the charter, employers must meet 10 standards including having a written

## The Violence at Work Charter standards

To qualify for the UNISON Violence At Work Charter mark, employers must meet the following standards:

1. The employer has a written violence and aggression at work policy, which is available to all staff. The policy should also cover lone working.
2. Responsibility for implementing these policies lies with a senior manager.
3. Measures are taken to reduce staff working in isolated buildings, offices or other work areas to a minimum.
4. Staff are encouraged to report all violent incidents and they are told how to do this.
5. The employer collects and monitors data on violent incidents on a regular and ongoing basis.
6. Where they are in place, union safety reps are able to access this data and are consulted on solutions to issues relating to violence in the workplace.
7. Thorough risk assessments are conducted for staff placed in vulnerable situations.
8. The employer has support pathways in place for staff who are victims of violence at work, so that they know where to turn for advice and support.
9. Training to ensure staff are aware of the appropriate way to deal with threatening situations.
10. Where appropriate, independent counselling services are available to staff who are the victims of violence at work.

violence and aggression policy, implementing measures to reduce staff working in isolation, carrying out thorough risk assessments and, where appropriate, providing access to independent counselling for staff who are the victim of violence at work.

Sara is also keen to seek legislative change, in line with the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 which gives courts stronger sentencing powers for assaults on those working in policing and other emergency services but does not cover other public sector workers such as carers and social workers.

- To find out more about UNISON's Violence at Work Charter, contact UNISON's health and safety national officer, Joe Donnelly, at [healthandsafety@unison.co.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@unison.co.uk)

# 'It is rewarding to support colleagues'

Sara Evans likes nothing more than being able to help a colleague through a difficult time, offering support and holding their hand, both figuratively and physically if necessary.

As a health and safety representative and UNISON steward, Sara has supported many members and admits that, while it is always good to help someone achieve a positive outcome, sometimes it's equally important to manage expectations.

"It is incredibly rewarding to be able to offer support to colleagues, and I particularly like giving the most lowly paid of our members a voice. So many people just do not understand some of the struggles the low paid have and, of course, the current cost of living crisis has hit them harder; it has had a much higher impact on their ability to pay for the essentials. Most of these workers have no savings. I am desperate to make sure their voices are heard," Sara explained.

"They are often the very group of workers who need our help and yet they also find it the hardest to get involved in our work. They may be carers at work and then go home to care for others too.

"I would love to see more of these colleagues become union safety representatives and stewards and access the training and development opportunities available to them."



Sara Evans.

can help employees when she was dismissed from a job in the private sector.

She worked as housekeeper for a prospective Conservative MEP, leading to some interesting conversations which proved enlightening to both sides, but when he passed away she lost her job and due to the way her dismissal was handled she took the family to an Employment Tribunal, finally settling out of court.

On then taking up a role at

really didn't have a clue.

"I completed the steward training and then the health and safety training and have really made the most of the opportunities that have come my way. I want to help others do the same - particularly the lowest paid of our members.

"Being a steward and safety rep is one of the best bits of being part of UNISON even though I have now been involved in the union's self-organised groups and the National Executive Committee (NEC).

With a clear appetite for developing her knowledge and skills, Sara attained a Diploma in Employment Law and this has helped her secure a number of notable wins on members' behalf. A recent case, which did not end positively in terms of the outcome, still concluded with the member involved sending Sara a 'beautiful' card thanking her for her support.

"We felt the result might not go her way," Sara explained, "The member stood up and made her voice heard because I was standing next to her, empowering her to do so just like a long time ago someone stood next to me and empowered me to do the same thing."

Sara is the East Midlands low paid representative on the NEC and sits on the regional and national health and safety committees and is a trustee on UNISON's There For You charity.

A keen advocate for encouraging more people to get involved in UNISON, on meeting new staff to the council, Sara likes to ask them if they are members of a union and if they understand what unions do.

"I always tell them that they can have a voice with a union, and that our voices are always stronger when we join together," she said, "We need to encourage more young people to get involved with UNISON as they are the future of the union.

"I want everyone to have the same support and opportunities that I have received."

## “ WE NEED TO ENCOURAGE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED WITH UNISON AS THEY ARE THE FUTURE OF THE UNION.

Sara currently works as a chef at a unit for adults with learning difficulties, a role which she thoroughly enjoys, despite the challenges it sometimes brings.

"Being the cook, I am always very popular, and I have seen how some of those using the services of the unit have developed and moved on," she explains.

"I have learnt a lot about learning disabilities. I have always believed that we are all equal, we are all human, we should all respect one another and that we should celebrate each other's qualities and differences.

"This is the same within UNISON and I have been able to develop support for members within local government who have been subjected to unconscious bias in situations where black members are being treated differently to their white colleagues. The system almost seems to be there to break people and we have to challenge this to bring about change."

Growing up in Cornwall, she found few people to support her socialist outlook and having moved further north first became aware of the way in which union membership

Nottinghamshire County Council, she did not hesitate to join a union, first joining Unite and then 10 years ago, UNISON, thankful to have a union in her corner should she need help, advice or support.

Attending her first UNISON women's branch self-organised group meeting, Sara discovered that the current chair was standing down. Natalie Bryan took on the chair role.

That first meeting sparked an interest in getting more involved. Sara and Natalie attended their first Women's Conference together and have continued to work for members since. Natalie is now Sara's union convener.

"During my previous marriage, I was never really encouraged or supported but my second husband has always been right behind me, which has been really empowering," she explained.

"I found I could get involved, and I realised I could learn - I really got the bug for learning - and not only have a voice myself but speak for others to really make a difference but also to encourage them to find their own voices. I think back to my first union meetings and I



# Why 28 April is important for everyday not just for one day of the year

Two key events in the health and safety year fall on the same day.

[World Day for Safety and Health at Work](#) and [International Workers Memorial Day](#) were both marked by UNISON on 28 April. And while the day has passed, the underlying issues behind these events remain.

World Day for Safety and Health at Work was launched by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2023 and this year's theme was [ensuring safe and healthy work now in a changing climate](#).

The ILO has launched a new report 'Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate' revealing alarming new data on the impact of climate change on workers' safety and health.

The memorial day serves as a way to remember those who have died either because of a workplace accident, ill-health or diseases as a result of work.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) [annual statistics](#) show on average that 135 workers are killed in work related accidents each year. They also estimate that there are around 13,000 deaths each year from occupational lung disease and cancer caused by past exposure at work to chemicals and dust, such as asbestos or silica.

But safety campaigners estimate that the true figure for all work-related deaths is closer to 50,000 each year.

UNISON's Regional Health and Safety Committee are calling on branches and their safety reps to raise with employers and members the importance of health, safety, and wellbeing of workers in a changing climate. In 2024 a good employer should accommodate the climate changes we are experiencing not just resist them.



## Themes and priorities for the year ahead

Six health and safety priorities for the region have been identified by UNISON's Regional Health and Safety Committee.

Achieving these priorities rests not solely with the committee but with all safety representatives, branches, groups and levels of the union across the East Midlands.

"Only together can we deliver on health and safety as a key pillar of trade unionism in the workplace," says Andrew Holloway, secretary to the health and safety committee.

The six identified priorities are:

- **Raising the profile of Health and Safety.** This would include ensuring members know their rights and know the routes to raise issues and also communicating examples of where things have gone wrong and where they have gone right.
- **Communication,** through a range of means such as putting information on noticeboards and sharing news on the regional UNISON website and through email bulletins.
- **Training and development** (of the safety rep network), ensuring effective buddying and mentoring systems are in place for new and experienced safety reps and that courses are advertised, and made as accessible as possible.
- **Campaigning,** regularly raising awareness of issues and holding regular meetings with management to discuss policy, issues and risk assessments.
- **Recruitment** (of safety reps and officers), through promoting the role of the safety reps, the need for them, and explaining what is involved. Also including encouraging more women into the safety rep role
- **Organising** (the safety rep network) through a template branch safety rep network and identification of any gaps in the network.

## Could you share a success story?

UNISON branches are being asked to put forward local health and safety wins that could be shared with the wider branch network through this newsletter.

Ideally, the branch health and safety rep would be interviewed about the success so they could explain the workplace issue and how they got involved. They would also talk about what they did and highlight the outcome of their actions.

The branch would also be able to put forward their top tips for safety success.

All articles produced as a result of the interview could be reviewed by the branch ahead of publication.

If you have ideas for features of this kind please email: [EastMidsSafetyTeam@unison.co.uk](mailto:EastMidsSafetyTeam@unison.co.uk)