



Guidance on Air Pollution for Union Reps

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Air Pollution – all in a day's work?

Having decent work means being able to breathe clean air at work. The reality for most workers is that the air they are exposed to at work and on the work journey is polluted. There is very little acknowledgement of this in most government and local authority clean air policies. Government strategy is essentially an exercise in kicking the can down the road by delaying vital measures or passing it over to local authorities to sort out.

Air pollution is an occupational health issue

There is rightly a public outcry about air pollution as a public health emergency. But it is also an occupational health emergency. The World Health Organisation (WHO) make it clear that having decent work means being able to breathe clean air at work. They estimate that occupational exposure to air pollution at the workplace causes more than 860,000 deaths worldwide each year. Outdoor workers are particularly vulnerable to ambient (outdoor) pollution; at least 1.2 billion workers work outdoors most of their work time.

Air pollution is mainly caused by work-related activities.

Yet you wouldn't think this was the case if you read all the consultation documents and public policy pronouncements on the subject. Even many of the environmental organisations who are campaigning for clean air fail to properly acknowledge this fact. Transport is responsible for over half of pollutants, and most of these journeys are directly or indirectly related to work activities. When you factor in the pollution generated by other business activities linked to production and energy use it is clear which is the number one source compared to domestic and other factors.

Air pollution is a trade union issue

If work is the main source of pollution it follows that is an issue for unions. Workers are exposed to harmful levels in their journey to and from work, and in the workplace itself whether it is indoors or outdoors. The range of pollutants and building design mean that it will be a combination of both, and that one source will often increase exposure levels in the other. Unions have a vital role in improving health and safety standards and air pollution is no exception.

Air pollution is a climate change issue

Although they may seem to be two very different issues, climate change and air pollution are closely interlinked, so by reducing air pollution we also protect the climate. Air pollutants include more than just greenhouse gases—principally carbon dioxide but also methane, nitrous oxide and others—but there's a big overlap: the two often interact with each other. For instance, air pollution in the form of particulate matter from diesel engines is circulated around the globe, ending up in the most remote places, including the polar regions. When it lands on ice and snow it darkens them slightly, leading to less sunlight reflected back into space, and contributing to global warming

Air pollution is a social justice issue

In addition to their occupational exposure, many workers live in neighbourhoods that have higher levels of pollution. They are more likely to live near major roads and poorer quality green spaces. Unions will also need to campaign to ensure that measures to reduce pollution don't unfairly penalise those on lower incomes. Transport and energy pricing policies should be based on around progressive taxation policy. Equally clean air policies must be assessed against their impact on jobs to ensure that just transition principles are applied

Air pollution is a campaign issue

The laws and enforcement protecting workers from air pollution is deeply flawed. A new Clean Air Act and backed up by improvements in health and safety law should be enacted. Unions working with other campaigners will need to ensure any statutory framework is effectively enforced. At a regional and local level unions can form alliances that monitor and improve standards for their local communities.

Action at work

Find out the current state of play by discussing workplace air pollution with members and other reps. You may want to use the checklist below to help you get an overall picture. Obtain access to current policies or procedures. You may need to contact a member of management to provide some of the information. To start with focus on those areas, workers or jobs that may be at particular risk.

You may find useful information by contacting local organisations. This could include the local authority who should have an air quality action plan that may provide information on monitoring stations near to work locations. Community and campaign groups may also have access to useful information and resources.

Air pollution checklist for union reps

Topic	Yes / No	Comments
1. Pollution hotspots – Are there any specific areas where you feel there may be a risk from air pollution?		
2. Groups of workers – Are there particular types of jobs that are at risk from air pollution, or vulnerable workers who may have pre-existing conditions that put them at risk?		
3. Policy – Is work-related air pollution referenced in the health and safety policy and / or any other policy document?		
4. Indoor exposure levels – Have measurements been taken of pollution levels inside the building?		
5. Outdoor exposure levels – Have measurements been taken of pollution levels outside the building?		
6. Changes to work activities / infrastructure - Does your employer carry out environmental impact assessments on air pollution related to future plans? i.e. any changes to sites, buildings, work processes, anything that could impact the environment physically.		
7. Hazard identification – Have hazards associated with air pollutants been identified?		
8. Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Risk assessment – Has a risk assessment been undertaken for hazards where there is a risk to workers and / or others		
9. Consultation – Has there been a discussion about air pollution at the health and safety committee or any other joint management / union forum?		

10. Employer information – Has the employer provided any information to staff about risks of air pollution in specific locations or travel routes, or jobs and groups of workers?		
11. Trade Union information – Has your union developed any policy or guidance on work-related air pollution?		
12. Branch lead - Is there anyone in the branch who is co-ordinating union work on air pollution?		
13. Membership awareness – Has any information been provided by the union on air pollution risks?		
14. Links with external organisations – Have any links been made with campaign groups to get support for information, monitoring, local authority measurements and related policies?		
15. Obtaining data on pollution levels – Are you interested in testing pollution levels in your workplace and / or receiving information on monitoring sites near your location?		
16. TUCAN - Are you interested in working towards the aims of the TUCAN charter by running or becoming involved in an event to promote it?		

Air Pollution sources of information

TUCAN – Clean Air Charter <http://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/GJA-TU-Clean-Air-CharterEMAIL.pdf>

Greener Jobs Alliance - Air pollution online training modules. Free of charge and no registration required
<http://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/courses/>

Bi-monthly newsletter with regular air quality updates

Hazards - Hazards Magazine Diesel special: www.hazards.org/

Fuming: <http://www.hazards.org/chemicals/fuming.htm>

Diesel out Prevention Factsheet: <http://www.hazards.org/chemicals/diediesel.htm> and

Die diesel die poster: <http://www.hazards.org/images/h144nedposterlarge.jpg>

Hazards 144, October-December 2018. Hazards Infographic Cancers and their work

causes <http://www.hazards.org/images/h145targetcancerslarge.gif>

TUC - Diesel Exhaust in the workplace Guide <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/DieselExhaustWorkplace1.pdf>

Individual union resources – Check your union web site

Hazards Campaign – www.hazardscampaign.org.uk

Friends of the Earth <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/clean-air>

UN Air pollution and climate change resources <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/air-pollution-and-climate-change-two-sides-same-coin>

Client Earth <https://www.clientearth.org/air-pollution/>

British Lung Foundation <https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/air-pollution>

British Safety Council <https://www.britsafe.org/campaigns-policy/time-to-breathe-air-pollution-campaign/>

Kings College London Air Quality Network <https://www.londonair.org.uk/LondonAir/Default.aspx>

Global Action Plan <https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/clean-air/about-clean-air>