**Hazards Campaign Conference 2021**

**Sunday 1 August 2021: 10.30am – 11.30am and 11.45am – 12.45pm**

**Workshop: Safety Reps Organising Creatively to Keep Workers Safe During the Pandemic and Beyond**

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**Introduction**

This year, the annual Hazards campaign conference is taking place shortly after the government swept away most of the last remaining restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Despite surging Covid infection rates, it has pressed ahead with step 4 of its roadmap out of lockdown on 19 July. Prime minister Boris Johnson acknowledged that doing so would lead to more hospitalisations and deaths.

Instead of mandating face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces, this is now just expected and recommended – although Public Health England infection control guidance remains in place for health and social care. The government has replaced the instruction to work from home where possible with guidance for a gradual return to work over the summer.

Later this month, from 16 August, “double vaccinated people” and those aged under 18 will no longer need to self-isolate if they are identified as a close contact of someone with Covid-19.

Meanwhile, “Covid-Secure” guidelines for 14 different types of workplace have been replaced with six new sets of guidance the TUC describes as rushed through, inadequate and “a recipe for chaos and rising infections”.

The original 14 guidelines were too weak, but some at least the unions had some input into them. The latest guidelines were published without proper consultation with unions or employers and even business leaders are critical.

Institute of Directors policy director, Dr Roger Barker, pointed to “a series of mixed messages and patchwork requirements” from government: Return to work or continue to stay at home. Throw away your masks or continue to wear them.

**So, what can safety reps do to keep their workplaces – and those working at home – safe?**

Throughout the pandemic, trade unions and their safety reps have been at the forefront of keeping their workmates safe and their role has never been more vital.

As well as the dangers of Covid infection, we know the pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing mental health crisis, and unions are worried that prolonged homeworking, with unsuitable workstations, will lead to even more workers developing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

All the evidence shows that union workplaces are safer workplaces, and research carried out during the pandemic makes the case for safety rep action even stronger.

Research for the TUC into Covid workplace safety in the food and drinks sector by the universities of Greenwich and Hull and Incomes Data Services (https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUCHSreport.pdf) found that:

* Workplaces with union health and safety reps were significantly more likely to report sufficient PPE (73% versus 53% of those with no health and safety rep);
* One in five (21%) workers reported inadequate social distancing measures in March/April 2020, with those in workplaces with union health and safety reps significantly less likely to do so;
* Around half of those in the worker survey (49%) said they felt free to report a health and safety issue related to Covid in their workplace and having workplace representation makes a difference. Over half (57%) of workers in workplaces with a union recognised for individual representation on matters like grievances or disciplinaries agreed they felt able to, compared with 46% of those without such support.
* **Reps in Action**

**Union activists recognised as Unsung heroes of the pandemic - BFAWU Greencore Northampton**

The BFAWU foodworkers’ union branch at Greencore Northampton, which saw a large Covid outbreak in the summer of 2020, received a "Rose of Northamptonshire" for support to members during the Covid crisis.

It has a vibrant Facebook group page to keep members up to date on union negotiations with management, including in several different languages.

The reps use social media to report regularly on the issues they have raised with management and highlighting outstanding issues.

The Northamptonshire County Council award, part of an Unsung Heroes initiative, aims to “identify, and to express thanks to those groups or individuals who have worked tirelessly to keep our communities safe, and our businesses moving during the global COVID-19 crisis”.

The branch Facebook group can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/BfawuGreencoreNorthampton/>

**Working as part of a team – FDA, PCS and Prospect civil service unions join forces at the Insolvency Service**

FDA, PCS and Prospect civil service union safety reps in the Insolvency Service represent around 1,500 workers in total. FDA safety rep Ian Whittaker told Labour Research Department (LRD) the three safety reps from each union collaborated and worked together to help management develop “an excellent base risk assessment”.

They then developed, modified and improved this to cover return to office for business-critical purposes; safe working on third party premises; and ultimately safe return to offices generally, particularly for vulnerable workers whose home environments were not appropriate for home working.

“It was capable of being adapted to become a bespoke risk assessment for each function or premises,” Whittaker told LRD.  “We were also able to ‘inspect’ remotely prior to implementation and monitor effectiveness once implemented.” This was time-consuming, particularly at a time when the reps were “very busy with the day job with extra Covid-generated work” as well as “business as usual”.  He added: “However, it was worth it.”

**Using a Union Inspection Notice to fight Covid infection – PCS British Museum branch**

In October, the PCS civil service union branch at the British Museum served a Union Inspection Notice (UIN) on management to tackle the risk of Covid infection in overcrowded changing rooms which, the union said, often had little to no ventilation.

A UIN is a formal notice from union-accredited health and safety reps to an employer highlighting breaches of the Health and Safety at Work act 1974. TUC guidance on using UINs can be found in *Safety representatives: getting more than the minimum — a TUC guide to roving safety representatives and Union Improvement Notices*. This can be found on the TUC website.

The union said that measures such as opening up more areas to provide extra locker room space, or staggering shift times to allow for a controlled system to minimise congestion, had not been put in place.

**UNISON rep pushes for social distancing for refuse workers**

A UNISON refuse collection rep told the union’s *Activist* journal that social distancing has been challenging. His job “usually involves spending whole days shoulder-to-shoulder in a lorry cab with three or four colleagues, visiting thousands of homes”.

At national level, the joint trade unions agreed guidance with local government employers which states clearly that social distancing rules must be adhered to in council vehicles.

“It is up to employers to find solutions to avoid having more than two people in a cab,” UNISON reported. “Some are using mini vans to take workers to their collection rounds, to avoid crowded cabs. This might mean redeploying drivers from other services, but it has to happen.”

The rep pushed for improvements with local management, including minimising the number of refuse workers that come to the office every morning, taking steps to avoid people congregating in the team room, and cutting down the time refuse workers spend together in their lorries.

**Using Section 44 – NEU branch at Kingsway Primary School, Wallasey**

The NEU education union reported in the January/February 2021 issue of its Educate magazine that members at Kingsway Primary School in Wallasey successfully reached an agreement with their employer over health and safety concerns just one day before strikes at the school were due to start.

Two union members had used Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 to resolve a lack of adequate running water at the school in May and June. This became a serious concern as pupils and staff were unable to maintain basic hygiene during the height of the pandemic.

Section 44 protects workers from “detriment” — or unfair action by the employer — where “in circumstances of danger which they reasonably believed to be serious and imminent”, they left work, refused to return to work, or took steps to protect themselves or others.

**“Do what you can” – University College London UCU branch negotiates progressive policies to tackle Covid-related mental ill health**

University College London (UCL) UCU lecturers’ union branch president Sean Wallis told LRD that the union negotiated a number of progressive practices to tackle Covid-related mental health at work.

For example, especially during periods of school closures, UCL agreed a “best endeavours” or “do-what-you-can” policy for all staff during the pandemic.

“From the outset we pressed the employer to recognise that formal capability procedures would be difficult to justify in the circumstances,” he said.

**This workshop will help safety reps to get creative to keep their workmates safe.**

It will:

* Provide a list of resources looking at examples of safety rep campaigns and action to improve safety, both before and during the pandemic;
* Provide some examples of effective action by safety reps; and
* Give you the opportunity to talk to and learn from safety reps from across different types of workplace and sector.