

36th HAZARDS Conference 5th – 7th Sept 2025 Delegate's Report

Deregulation, AI and climate change – the critical role of safety reps

Every year union safety reps and safety activists gather at a national three-day conference aimed at keeping workers – and those affected by work – safe (and healthy!). Whether ourselves, our partners or our children, in the modern era no-one should be killed, maimed or made ill as a result of having to earn a living. Workplaces covered by union safety organisation are more than twice as safe as unorganised ones - although we do not emphasize this key benefit of union membership nearly enough. In recent times the challenges we face have been huge with more deregulation, a hostile political landscape and cuts to public services, combined with the effects of climate change and rapid technological advances in workplaces.

This year's (36th) Hazards conference saw over 220 activists take part in person, with a smaller number attending online. There were a significant number of women delegates and a substantial number of reps from black and ethnic minorities, with delegates from various unions coming from diverse occupations/workplaces.

Intro full plenary session - Friday evening

Chair: **Doug Russell** former USDAW National Safety Officer welcomed the delegates and introduced:

Chenay Arberry (via Zoom) from the *AFL-CIO*. The AFL-CIO represents over 50 trade unions in the USA and Chenay is particularly involved in the effects of heat, toxic chemicals and the impact of AI on workers.

Chenay talked about concerns with surveillance, algorithmic management, tracking and the erosion of workers' rights. She noted that many workers no longer have a manager, relying instead on an app which tells you where, when and how to work. There's a constant pressure on workers to achieve high targets - and a recalibration of work affecting the whole team when an individual fails to keep up. Monitoring workers includes wearing devices, cameras, keystroke/online monitoring, each contributing to a lack of autonomy, 'rushing' tasks and extreme levels of stress. She concluded with the importance of workers and their reps pushing back where safety is being undermined. We **must** retain a sufficient level of **human control over AI systems**.

The second speaker was **Dr Philippa Collins** (Bristol University) an expert in labour law & human rights. She spoke alongside **Dr Joe Atkinson** (University of Southampton) Associate Professor of Employment Law and Co-Director of the Centre for Women, Equality and Law.

The speakers explored **AI & algorithmic management**, the harms to health & safety, quality of work and well-being - and the safeguards needed. On algorithmic management, Philippa looked at the various ways it was being applied in areas such as pre-screening of job applicants, picking and scheduling in warehousing/driving work, monitoring/'rating' of work, services and workers through managing their time, work and calls. Similarly, the impact these systems have in the disciplinary process based on managed targets/ metrics and minimising the 'human' element in managing workers.

Joe Atkinson noted that these technologies are rapidly expanding into other areas of work and covering the whole work-cycle. Apart from workers' safety and health, there are implications for human rights in areas such as privacy and equality. In the area of Health, increased pressures can be observed in monitoring, work intensification, expectations and standardisation involving a serious impact on physical and mental health. **Minute by minute monitoring creates unrealistic expectations and pressures previously unknown in most workplaces.** 'Downgrading' of workers autonomy often results in **stress** and **alienation**.

Workers often have these non-transparent systems imposed on them with little or no consultation. Controlled-license software is difficult to influence and even managers or developers can rarely correct inconsistencies - including on safety issues. Joe highlighted the importance of workers having an input before new systems are introduced and cited data protection as one way to flag concerns in workplace discussions. He went on to show how work safety can benefit from the **responsible** implementation of AI (e.g. during the COVID pandemic, for lone/ isolated workers, predictive risk management or assessing safety in real time). He concluded we need to have regulatory oversight, better rights at work to meet these new challenges along with human-based auditing and assessing the systems. Joe and Philippa underlined the points above in their booklet *Algorithmic Management and a New Generation of Rights at Work*.

The final speaker was **Dr Craig Gent** (LSE). Craig observed the future of work had many concerns from low pay, job insecurity, fewer protections and intensification *through technology*. Craig narrated the daily routine of a logistics worker called *Lorenzo* from the start of his working day to the end. **The entirety of his day is governed by algorithmic management systems** from duties, targets, wearable devices, tasks and rest breaks. The effects include **isolation, deskilling, stress, pressure, paranoia, physical injuries and harm from postponing breaks - including toilet breaks**. The ensuing lack of dignity is *unacceptable*. Craig went on to explain the marketing term 'AI' is misleading. It is really an umbrella for multiple, diverse and complex systems. Becoming familiar with this terminology is important in order to question it. Union members need to be alerted to and forewarned about these AI-driven changes, so they do not have to bear the brunt of the negative effects.

A full audience discussion ensued with questions and contributions before retiring to the various refreshment bars!

Second full Plenary meeting- Saturday morning

Dealing with Stress and Violence at Work

chaired by **Alex Lancaster** (Safety Officer, UCU). She introduced several speakers; *Mike Hines* on **stress**, *Dr. Ruth Beresford* and *Bob Jeffrey* on **sexual harassment in hospitality**, *Jonathan Havard* on **workplace violence and stress**. The Chair related the UCU's efforts to address work-related stress and violence in educational workplaces, highlighting the need for employers to better protect vulnerable workers and comply with safety legislation.

Mike Hines (RCN safety officer) emphasised that stress should be treated as a **collective issue** rather than an individual one, pointing out that high stress levels among healthcare workers are not being adequately addressed by employers. He argued that trade unions need to build evidence databases to pressure employers & the HSE to take action on stress-related issues, specifically advocating a more active engagement with the HSE - to their powers to enforce change.

Dr. Ruth Beresford and **Dr. Bob Jeffrey** (Hallam University) outlined their research on sexual harassment in the hospitality industry, highlighting its prevalence and the vulnerabilities of workers in this sector. They explained how young, minority groups, and precarious workers are particularly at risk, and emphasised the need for better understanding, reporting mechanisms, and regulatory changes to address this issue. Their presentation concluded with a call for action, including making sexual harassment a workplace health and safety issue and strengthening enforcement mechanisms.

Jonathan Havard from the RMT presented an update on their *Action Against Assaults* campaign, highlighting the need to reduce assaults on public transport staff and passengers.

He shared statistics from a recent survey of 6,000 members, revealing high levels of workplace violence and inadequate training. The RMT has been actively involved in political campaigns, including seeking legislative changes in Scotland and England, and organising an annual campaign week. The RMT have also developed a **Violence at Work Charter** with specific demands on employers, such as providing adequate training and ending lone working.

Jonathan emphasised that employers and the government must improve protection of both staff and passengers. He underlined the need for effective workplace stress risk assessments, and given multi-industry nature of workplace violence, he suggested a collective approach involving unions and government to address these issues effectively.

In the extensive audience discussion that ensued, it was noted that Scottish workers enjoy (slightly) more progressive employment rights. but elsewhere individual workers often have to bring tribunal cases to address harassment. Delegates described the use of body-worn cameras in healthcare settings in Manchester hospitals to help reduce patient aggression, but the panel emphasised that cameras should be part of broader safety strategies rather than the sole solution. The panel also argued for better enforcement vs. workplace violence by the **Office of Rail and Road**, following a recent murder at Ilford Station.

Risk assessment reports were seen as essential in order to share information and build a comprehensive database. The panel discussed the challenges in reporting workplace incidents and underlined the need for unions to follow up on every case to ensure action is taken by employers or authorities. Similarly with the importance of preventative risk assessments it was suggested that the trade union movement should adopt a joined-up approach to address issues like workplace sexual harassment. The panel also touched on the role of Trades Councils in strengthening the union voice on sexual harassment in the community.

Choice of Workshops - morning & afternoon sessions

Safety Reps Functions and Workplace Inspections
The role of safety reps on work related Stress and Mental Health harm
Organising and Campaigning on H&S
Tackling Work related violence
Working in extreme weather conditions- controlling the risks
What is lurking beneath the surface in our workplace buildings and what do safety reps need to do?
Sex and gender - the missing element in health and safety?
Employer's climate policies - how can safety reps ensure they are fit for purpose?
Occupational Health - safe guarding your future
Our future is young! How do we engage & support young workers on safety?

Third Plenary meeting - Saturday Afternoon

Workers Health Crisis amid a lack of Enforcement

Chaired by **Dan Shears** (GMB Safety Officer). He underlined the crucial role of the **Hazards Magazine** and the hard work of HSE staff, explaining that concerns raised today lie with politicians and key decision-makers.

Luke Collins (UNITE Safety Officer) opened with the challenges facing reps/ unions due to continued underfunding of the HSE. Already suffering from a 50% cut in funds under the Tories, the current government it seems to be pursuing a similar strategy. It was noted however that the current government is at least open to engaging with the unions. Luke described the situation of our inspectors, few in number, highly qualified, recognised internationally, but poorly remunerated. It takes years of training and experience to shape an effective inspector, and they face the pressures of high workloads, insufficient resources, and the need for research and scientific analysis on a minimal budget.

The result....Fewer inspectors...Fewer visits...Fewer interventions... Fewer Prosecutions and more deaths! In reality, the HSE cannot meet the current demand and **the chances of bringing an inspector into your workplace, even for serious problems, is extremely low.** The Chair endorsed this, talking about his experience in the HSE. The dismantling of key services has occurred without public consultation, scrutiny or discussion in parliament.

Ceri Williams from the Welsh TUC. Ceri talked about a new report from TUC Cymru, *Work Health & Safety in Wales: Using and Sharing Information* (David Walters and Eva Makri). This report goes beyond the traditional physical risks, covering low pay, inequality, job insecurity, technological change, lack of worker representation, stress and intensified work. Ceri quoted some key findings from the report.

- Only 1 in 3 workers think work contributes positively to their mental or physical health.
- 1.8 million days are lost to work-related ill health in Wales
- workplaces with the highest risk of exploitation; hand car washes, seasonal agriculture, social care and construction.
- Medium risk includes nail bars, hospitality, garment making, the shellfish industry and warehousing.

On enforcement Ceri noted that most of the protections in place for **physical** risk are absent for **psychosocial** risks. The report indicates the shortage in HSE funding/ resources and a gap in enforcement particularly on mental health. In terms of a positive way forward, Ceri proposed more money for regulation/enforcement, better education, collecting comprehensive data and sharing information between agencies and sectors. He acknowledged that the proposed **Fair Work Agency** should bring some of these together.

Harminder Bains (Industrial disease dept @ *Leigh Day*) talked about the value of the Hazards Campaign and talked about her personal family experience relating to **mesothelioma**. Asbestos is still widespread and affects many families - made worse by government inaction on dealing with this huge public health threat. Harminder talked of the powerful companies behind the deadly trade, who deployed deceptive tactics like infiltrating agents like **Rob Moore** into the safety campaigns. Moore's role is portrayed in the film, *The Gardener, The Buddhist and the Spy* which Harminder tried to get BBC executive *Charlotte Moore* (sister of Rob) to screen without success.

The asbestos industry has a long history and is still not completely banned in most countries. The UK banned the last form of asbestos in 1999 but asbestos remains present in many UK buildings. In schools, the younger the person exposed asbestos, the higher the chance of contracting an asbestos-related disease in later life. In short, this toxic substance needs to be

safely removed and the government needs to act on this, domestically and on global trade. Currently the Trump administration is seeking to reduce regulation of the US Asbestos industry.

Final Plenary meeting – Sunday morning

The session opened with a short presentation from Hazards Magazine Sub-Editor, **Jawad Qasrawi**. Jawad linked the conference theme of AI with the Hazards Magazine stating that, inputting truth into the systems is the only way to make them effective. Hazards Magazine provides an 'early warning system' based on truth and helps workers to pushback. **Hazards Magazine is run on a shoestring** so all delegates should encourage unions and their branches to subscribe and keep this key resource alive.

Andrea Oates (Labour Research Department) talked about how climate change, air quality and health & safety are inextricably linked. Heat stress, storms, flooding are impacting workers more and more and we are **not** prepared to meet these challenges in the UK. Recently the FBU reported 17 fire and rescue services were drafted into Dorset fires without specialist PPE or real-world training to carry out this work. Safety reps need to be involved in mitigation strategies, using safety reps' rights and climate adaptation. Negotiating a minimum heat level at work and encouraging employers to invest in good insulation and, air quality are crucial. **2026 will see a 'year of climate action'** Delegates should also note the **'Make Them Pay'** campaign – taxing the super rich and wealthy corporations. **Activities between the 14-15 November 2025, workplace action/ global solidarity ahead of COP 30 in Brazil.**

Cliona Shephard (Heat Strike Digital Campaigner and Organiser) expressed how the public and workers in general are feeling the effects of climate change through frequent and intense heat waves. Vulnerable people are at greater risk and workers often struggle to manage under these hotter conditions. **At Heat Strike there are three key demands:**

1. Set a national maximum working temperature. We demand that the UK government set a national maximum indoor working temperature of 30°C (27°C for those doing strenuous work).
2. Put in place a heat wave furlough scheme. Heat waves in the UK are only set to get hotter and more frequent. We demand that the government works with employers and Trade Unions to set up a heat wave furlough scheme for when they can't keep workplace temperatures below 30°C.
3. Make a climate action plan. In 2022 the High Court ruled that the UK government's climate action plan is **so inadequate it is illegal**. In the face of ever more frequent and deadly extreme weather, we demand that our government formulates a plan that responds to the climate crisis by tackling its causes thus averting the worst of its impacts in years to come. The Chair reminded reps that we already have some powers under current law & also recognition from the HSE that employers should control these risks to workers.

Sean Halsall (N.W. Unite union activist / tutor) spoke about how the perpetual crises facing workers e.g. **cost of living, climate, and air quality** is a result of a sickness of the system we live under. The onus is put on ordinary people to recycle, buy an EV, switch off lights etc while modern warfare and corporate greed undo any gains we make many times over. **Climate refugees** are now a reality - fuelling the fears espoused by the far right. **This is a crisis of capitalism seeking endless growth on a struggling planet with finite resources**. After one year in office the Labour government has continued with this same model, tinkering around the edges and now the far right is scapegoating the victims - those in need.

Ian Hodson (BFAWU) opened by acknowledging **Janet Newsham's retirement** and the valuable contributions she has made to the Hazards and TU movements. Ian talked about the ineffectual role of the government in enforcing worker safety; with people still made ill and dying due to their work. The HSE avoid doing anything about the millions affected by sexual harassment in

the workplace. Between 9- 16 million are affected by some form of sexual harassment at work and the HSE places the responsibility onto the EHRC who have **no** inspectors or workplace powers. The DWP needs the HSE to force employers to make workplaces safe, allowing workers to work safely and help the economy.

Climate change is pushing more workers to migrate and the disinformation from the far right is dividing communities. Ian then celebrated the valuable work safety reps do, pushing back and chipping away at the issues that will save lives.

Paul Holleren (53 years an activist) was recognised for his work on health and safety across the union movement on mental health, suicides & COVID-19. Paul advised delegates that they should endeavour to keep **young people** engaged in health and safety.

Bad Boss Award Nominations: Birmingham City Council: Refuse workers dispute

Lancashire County Council: Stress, social worker workloads and peeling back safety

Hull Trains: Train driver sacked after raising driver fatigue concerns

2025 awards saw Hull Trains and Birmingham City Council voted as joint winners of 'Bad Boss'

Certificate of Excellence Awards:

End Not Defend – Workers Policy Project against workplace sexual harassment

ASLEF **Toilet Dignity** campaign – Access and use of toilets while at work

Unite: **United Minds mental health campaign** - focus on prevention and risk assessments

NW Unison COVID Action Group – support for workers and bereaved families

RCN Campaign on 'Corridor Care' – survey and report from RCN exposing the risks to patients and staff

UCU University of Birmingham Work-Related Stress – evidenced unsafe workloads and seeking prevention

GMB Midlands Health and Safety Forum – building and developing reps from scratch to enforce rights

Arthur Murray - Posthumous award for Arthur and the prosecuted **Shrewsbury 24**. After a 50 year campaign in March 2021 the Court of Appeal overturned the convictions of those taking strike action over pay & working conditions in 1972.

For access to scores of relevant articles & background documents, visit Gtr. Mcr Hazards website.

We remember our dead -

but we continue to fight like hell for the living!

- The next Hazards Conference - Keele University 4-6 September 2026

Delegate's verdict: **The Hazards Campaign. Magazine & Conference are a key part of our movement and should be given maximum possible support.**

John Murphy