

Hilda Palmer

I wanted to remind us that we estimate that at least 20% if not more cancers are caused by the occupational and the environmental exposures and even if we take a very moderate 12% of cancer as being caused by work, that's 18,000 deaths a year. That's an enormous number and as we heard about the deaths from air pollution that's not a number you would hear, it's caused by chemicals that people are exposed to at work, and shift work amongst other things.

I want to talk to you a little bit about what trade unions should be doing about tackling occupational cancer and the workplace, but before that I have to really just remind everybody, in case you don't know, that currently, we are in a situation where the government is attacking the whole health and safety regulatory and enforcement requirement. So the laws that workers fought for, for hundreds of years and the enforcement systems that we built up to make sure the employer obey those laws, these are all being broken down and the people that are inspecting the employers to make sure they are being compliant to the basic laws are all being cut tremendously.

What has happened as part of this is that occupational health, all the things we are talking about in terms of cancer, that is absolutely being wiped off the agenda.

So when we are talking about what can Trade Unions do, you have to understand that it's in that environment, so not only are trade unions fighting for their members jobs, pensions and wages etc, but they are trying to fight also for their health and safety. And they are fighting in a situation where the government is removing the regulations and enforcement on the employers to make them provide safe and health workplaces. And the government is not at all interested in doing anything about occupational cancer.

Helen and I attended the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) conference on cancer, and occupational disease recently. We protested outside because of their dithering, denial and delay on all sorts of occupational issues but particularly those relating to women.

It was the most complacent conference you could possibly imagine, in terms of what they are doing in terms of occupational health and specific things like shift work. But what they are doing is absolutely nothing. That's the situation in which workers find themselves and in which trade unions find themselves.

That's not to say that trade unions shouldn't be doing a great deal more, some trade unions are doing quite a lot of work on cancer such as Unite, GMB, doing work on vehicle exhaust emissions affecting drivers and delivery workers. Others like UCATT are working on asbestos and silica dust.

Unison and the Royal College of nursing are beginning to do some work on shift work and breast cancer. The teaching union, NASUWT are doing quite a lot of work with other unions on asbestos in schools. Because an unfeasible large number of people work in schools, which is not an environment you think they would be exposed to carcinogens like asbestos. So there is a lot of good working going on, but in general work on chemical hazards has gone

off the boil and no one is really setting the agenda, or speaking out very clearly about it. And that is what Trade Unions could be doing much more of, raising the issues, raising the profile, raising awareness among their members in the workplace and talking about these issues a great deal more.

So for example, as Andy and other people have said, that when the World Health Organisation came out and said that diesel exhaust emissions are a definite human carcinogenic, I don't think Trade Unions made enough of that and what that could mean for their members. And if we're not saying then we are not pushing anyone else to do that.

At the moment the government hasn't removed, a very good piece of legislation we have called the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH). In fact they have been very poor on enforcing this piece of his regulation which says that all employers have to assess the risks of all chemicals in their workplace for any risks they pose to workers health, and if they pose a risk such as being a carcinogen, endocrine disruptor, etc they immediately have to look at eliminating it if they can, if they cant, they have to look at substituting it with something safer, if they can't do that, then they have to look at engineering controls to reduce the exposure to all the people in the workplace, a collective intervention. And only as a last resort can they put people in personal protective equipment. And these regulations have been there since 1988, but they are incredible badly enforced and yet if they were enforced then an enormous amount could have been done, in terms of substituting carcinogens and other hazardous substances in the workplace over the last 20 odd years.

I think it's not only the enforcement authorities that have failed there, but also the Trade Unions, to really fully use this piece of legislation. There is lots and lots of information on occupational cancers, lots done by Rory O'Neill from Hazards, on what's safe to use, and what chemicals cause what type of cancers and what processes they are used in. But a lot of this information isn't getting out to the TU members and workers in their workplaces. There isn't really enough support on getting them to carry out the risk assessments or pushing the employers to make sure they are carrying out those risk assessments, identifying the carcinogens, because there are carcinogens in all workplaces, and then doing something about them and this is also true of issues like shift work.

Then there are lots of other things that have been done in other countries things like Toxic Use Reduction programs where trade unions could get much more behind the idea that we are trying to get all hazardous chemicals out of workplaces and we should be looking at how we reduce these and in some states in US they have laws that help them to do that. And we could be arguing for sun-setting carcinogens and other hazardous chemicals and we must work towards that. So in 5 yrs time we must get rid of that and try and put pressure on chemists and people to design better chemicals that would replace them and more information about alternatives.

There are very good websites one in the EU called Subs-port <http://www.chemsec.org/what-we-do/subsport> where you can look up chemicals you are using and find safer alternatives. And we should also be looking at zero usage of toxic chemicals, using as few toxic chemicals as we can, which also links with the green agenda.

I think we haven't as Trade Unions argued enough for this and we haven't pushed the employers hard enough. We need the regulatory and enforcement framework that is very strict and actually works which then actually drives innovation, drives change, and drives the manufacturers to come up with safer chemicals and safer processes. There are all sorts of ways in which this could be done.

And some of these are very simple, for example, in laboratories in Denmark they used to use acetone in the final wash so they would dry quickly and so the lab assistants came up with a solution, why don't we buy three times as much glassware and then things could dry as slowly as they like. A very simple and quiet an elegant solution.

Where workers are involved in finding those solutions and where once the framework is set up, where we actually say it's not good for workers to be exposed to toxic chemicals, or any chemicals in excess, it's certainly not good for them to be exposed to carcinogens, then we encourage workers to do that.

But this doesn't exist, isn't being imposed by government, Andy and other people have told you how our ministries and how our government are letting us down, that is a big problem.

But I also think that trade unions and the Hazards Campaign have to make more links between workers and communities on all these chemicals. If chemicals are being used in manufacturing process ie p_plasticisers like Bisphenol A and then they escape into the community and potentially getting into peoples food and water, then we have to be involved in all of that. We have to make this a common cause with community groups.

We have to push COSHH hierarchy, elimination, substitution, engineering controls, Toxic Use Reduction, zero use of toxic chemicals, and we have to push the precautionary principle. And we have to talk much more about inequality, health inequalities, and social inequalities, given that some workers are exposed multiply to toxic chemicals in their workplaces, and in their environment, and we have to be talking about all of that. And talking much more openly and challenging exactly what's being going on.

So although I think there is a lot of really good work going on, there is much more we could be doing. I don't really think we are doing enough. We are in a really vile environment at the moment where this government doesn't care about our health, we could all die anywhere at work or wherever, they don't really care about us at all.

They are setting a framework for health and safety at work which will mean in fact that more people are going to be exposed to more toxic chemicals and more harmful substances and unhealthy work practices such as shift work.

I just want to end and introduce you to one of our colleagues Simon Pickvance who worked in Sheffield where he set up a pioneering way of looking at workers health, which was working in doctor's surgeries talking to people when they came in with their health problems. Taking work histories from them and then discussing these histories with the doctors so the doctors had more of an idea why people were getting ill and what was causing it. Then they tried to work Trade Unions, and people locally to discuss how to tackle

those issues. They did really brilliant work and through that work Simon identified all sorts of low level exposures to chemicals and mixtures of chemicals that caused bladder cancer and a whole range of cancers but the HSE will not accept this exists. He knew far more about cancer and has given us tools to reveal this that are much more sensitive than the rather crude epidemiological studies that actually look at small groups of people, in workplaces where they have worked for 30 yrs, rather than huge numbers of people doing a whole range of work, where they are receive smaller exposures.

Simon actually died last year of mesothelioma caused by asbestos because he worked on a building site to raise money while he was actually doing this pioneering research. Thank you.

Deb: why on earth isn't this issue punching through, what's standing in the way of the decision makers in there (HoC)