

REMEMBER THE DEAD - FIGHT FOR THE LIVING WORKERS MEMORIAL DAY, APRIL 28TH

This factsheet gives guidance and encouragement on organising grassroots events on Workers Memorial Day (WMD).

Workers Memorial Day takes place on April 28th, an international day of remembrance of workers killed, disabled, injured or made unwell by their work. It highlights the preventable nature of the majority of workplace accidents and ill health and promotes campaigns and union organisation in the fight for improvements in workplace safety. The slogan for the day is *Remember the dead - Fight for the living*.

Workers Memorial Day originated in Canada in 1985 when the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) arranged events to commemorate those killed, injured or made unwell by their work. CUPE's symbol for the day is a caged canary as used to detect poisonous gas in mines, with the slogan *Remember the canary*. CUPE says, 'Today, CUPE members act as front line protection for their fellow citizens... they have become the canaries.' The Canadian government gave official status to the day when it passed the 'Act respecting a day of mourning for persons killed or injured in the workplace' on February 1st 1991.

Trade unions in the USA, the UK, Asia and elsewhere have organised events on this day since 1989. The Scottish TUC adopted Workers Memorial Day in 1993. The TUC formally adopted it in 1999 and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in 2000. This is all progress but what is needed most is action to involve all workers in this important event.

Background

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) estimates that 500 workers are killed at work every day (approx. 200,000 annually) and an estimated 65-165 million contract occupational diseases.

The ICFTU draws attention to attacks on trade union rights, organisers and members by governments and business around the world. The ICFTU says that in 1995 378 workers were murdered, 1,900 were injured, 5,000 were arrested or detained and 68,470 were dismissed because of their union activities. The ICFTU statistics could well underestimate the real levels. In the UK, on average over the last ten years, 300 workers died each year in what the HSE says are mostly

preventable accidents. This figure was a lot higher in the past. An estimated 20,000 die from occupational illnesses in addition to accidents. Thousands more are disabled, maimed and injured in preventable accidents. The number who suffer ill health because of conditions in industry and the materials they have to use, runs into hundreds of thousands.

Studies by the HSE have consistently shown that 90% of workplace accidents are preventable and that 70% of these are the result of employers failing to act appropriately to prevent them. Apart from the appalling cost to the families and friends of those damaged by work the HSE estimates the cost of this to the nation as up to £16 billion annually. In reality this financial cost amounts to a subsidy to employers.

What You Can Do

Many activities can be organised locally. Promotional posters are available from the Hazards Campaign and some unions. Purple 'Forget me knots' for people to wear are available from Greater Manchester Hazards Centre and UNISON. Your union may run its own WMD campaign so check with your regional or central health and safety department to see if they have promotional materials. Use this factsheet to inform people of the ideas behind WMD.

If there has been a fatal accident, or major injury, or a problem with occupational ill-health in your locality, this may create a good focus for the day. Keep in mind the other part of the slogan, *fight for the living*, and look at ways of promoting change to prevent repeat occurrences. Remember that WMD is about work and organising for improvements; it is not a religious event.

Some groups have organised a formal minute's silence as a mark of remembrance when all workers stop work, including bus drivers (Canada/USA). Others have organised meetings at lunch time or after work with invited speakers.

For local events contact your local newspaper/s and regional radio and TV stations and let them know what is going on and why. There has been considerable success in getting WMD covered on regional radio. If you think your event is of more than local significance you could try the national media. Events can involve local MPs, councillors, the regional HSE office, and other prominent people.

Each year WMD has a theme. In 2000 it was young people at work. Check with your union or the TUC to see what the current year's theme is.

Examples of past WMD activities

MSF London Region, supported by the Construction Safety Campaign, Hazards Campaign and others have held several protest marches to the HSE headquarters at Southwark Bridge.

The TGWU union branch in Walthamstow, East London, supported by the local Trades Union Council and MP, hold a ceremony at their commemorative Workers Memorial Day Tree and plaque in the grounds of the William Morris Gallery.

The Hazards Campaign in Birmingham commemorated those killed by placing many pairs of empty shoes in Victoria Square to represent the empty shoes left by people killed at work every year. A flag in the square was also lowered as part of the ceremony. A UNISON caravan has toured the West Midlands promoting WMD.

At Medway Council, Kent Council officials planted a memorial tree in Rochester Castle gardens, followed by the opening of an exhibition in the Corn Exchange.

Greater Manchester Hazards Centre continues to promote their WMD purple ribbon forget-me-knot and have held a meeting with the Bereaved by Work group on 'Inquests, can they improve health and safety at work.'

UNISON Scotland launched an anti-stress campaign.

The Trades Union Council in Walsall held a ceremony at their commemorative tree.

UNISON Haringey put on a WMD display in their offices and held local activities.

Liverpool TUC drove around Liverpool in a WMD van and gave leaflets about WMD and unions to the public.

Canadian unions, including the autoworkers union, and workers health centres ran a very successful campaign on cancer caused by work. They marched to the Ministry of Labour where a wreath was laid. Each marcher

carried a carnation representing a worker killed that year.

In the city hall square in Copenhagen, Denmark, trade unionists gathered to listen to speakers from the General Workers Union (SiD) and a joint construction union committee. There were 76 full sized plywood figures representing those killed at work that year.

The AFL-CIO (the USA's TUC) ran a nationwide campaign called 'safe jobs - make our voices heard.'

Members of New Zealand transport union RMTU stopped work at mid-day to observe a minute's silence for members killed and injured in work accidents.

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Posters: the Hazards Campaign has produced the illustrated poster for Workers Memorial Day. Copies are available from your local Hazards Centre or through the Greater Manchester Hazards Centre. If in doubt call the London Hazards Centre and we will put you in contact with the relevant group.

