

UNISON bullying survey reveals real impact of Government cuts

The shock findings of a UNISON survey show that six in ten workers across the UK have been bullied, or witnessed bullying, over the past six months. The union is warning that Government cuts are fuelling workplace bullying and silencing workers fearful of their jobs.

One in four workers say that staff cutbacks have led to workplace bullying - double the number from two years ago - and around half say they would be too scared to raise concerns during the period of cuts. The UK's largest union is predicting that the amount of workplace bullying will rocket further, as the cuts really start to bite.

Findings from the survey of more than 6,000 staff reveal that one in three employees are being bullied at work across the UK, with many more witnessing it. London had the highest number of workers, who had been bullied, or witnessed bullying - at 83%.

The bullied workers say it has led to mental stress, anxiety, anger and lowered motivation. However, more than half say they will stay in their jobs and suffer in silence - compared to only a quarter of staff in 2009.

Dave Prentis, UNISON's General Secretary, said: "This survey goes a long way to dispel the myth the Government is currently peddling, that there is no need for health and safety legislation. We need legislation to put a stop to millions of workers suffering in silence.

"The Government must rethink its savage cuts agenda, or see workers' health and efficiency deteriorate. It is more important than ever that workers join a union, as this may be their only point of call for help."

The survey was carried out by the Centre for Organisation Research and Development (CORD) at Portsmouth Business School during May 2011.

35% of all respondents say they have been bullied in the last six months (as the cuts started to set in). Additionally, 27% of all respondents have witnessed bullying during that period – a total of 62%.

The highest sector groups for bullying:

36% of local government workers

32% of higher education workers

33% of further education workers

31% of police staff

35% of school staff

A quarter of bullied workers say the bullying coincided with staff cutbacks (26.8%) - this has doubled in two years. Eight out of ten workers reveal they will have to do more for the same money in the face of budget cuts.

More than a quarter (27%) say their manager has been tougher on them since the cuts set in, and more than a quarter (27%) have seen or experienced more bullying since the cuts set in.

Only 39% are confident their organization will take cases of bullying seriously.

74% of those bullied say the person responsible was at a higher professional level.

Most common bullying behaviours were: rudeness and disrespect; being set unrealistic targets; isolation/exclusion; excessive work monitoring and criticism; withholding information

and intimidation.

The top reactions of workers who had been bullied were anger, lowered motivation, feeling undermined, anxiety or mental stress, powerlessness and isolation.

58% of the bullied workers have considered leaving their jobs, 53% have considered staying in their job and doing nothing about the bullying and 23% have considered legal action. In 2009, 25% said they would stay in their job and do nothing

Hitting back... Staff walk out on bully bosses

More than 550 engineers at Royal Mail subsidiary Romec took to the picket lines on 10th June, following claims of management bullying and "Big Brother" abuses of the company's vehicle tracking systems.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU), which represents more than half the firm's technicians, led strike action at mail centres across the country to protest against ill-treatment of its members. The ballot in April saw a 75 per cent turnout, with 92 per cent voting for strike action.

CWU national official Ray Ellis said that members were responding to a "regime of intimidation" and bullying of staff.

The company had changed employees' working hours from 8am-4pm to 12pm-8pm shifts without consulting the union and had withheld pay from staff who did not comply, he said. It had also written to staff offering cash payments in return for resignations, without consultation and in clear breach of its union agreement.

"All this is putting pressure on staff who are already being harassed by managers using tracker data," he said, referring to the company's vehicle tracking systems.

Mr Ellis said Romec's "Big Brother" actions amounted to a legal double standard. "If the union took unlawful action, the company could get a court injunction but with the company's actions we will have to go through lengthy tribunal proceedings."

Mental health experts warn against pace of incapacity benefit cuts

Mental health problems such as depression and anxiety may not be picked up by the government's new 'work capability assessment', critics warn.

The government's changes to the welfare system are having a "devastating" impact on hundreds of thousands of people with mental health problems and have driven some of the most vulnerable to try to take their own lives, according to charities and medical experts.

A recent study for the mental health charity Mind found that three-quarters of people it surveyed said the prospect of a work capability assessment had made their mental health worse and 51% said it had left them with suicidal thoughts.

The survey, which polled more than 300 people claiming incapacity benefit, found that 95% thought they would not be believed at their assessment. "It is extremely worrying that so many people are so concerned," said Paul Farmer, the charity's chief executive.

Liz Woollard, 48, who suffers from depression and anxiety, says she failed the test despite two GPs, a psychiatrist and a senior nurse stating she was not able to work. Following a 54-minute assessment, Woollard says she was turned down for employment support allowance. The subsequent report stated she "did not appear to be trembling ... sweating ... or making rocking movements".

Woollard, 46, appealed but had to wait 11 months for her case to be heard and the decision overturned. She has now been told that she will have to be reassessed again.

Julie Tipping, an appeals officer for the charity Disability Solutions, said Woollard's case was not unusual. She said many people with mental health problems had had their benefits cancelled and appealed successfully, only to be told their case needed to be reassessed again.

The government says it is committed to ensuring the work capability assessment is "as fair and accurate as possible" adding that it has accepted the recommendations of an independent review by Professor Malcolm Harrington last year.

"In consultation with charities including Mind, Professor Harrington is now looking at the way mental health is assessed in the work capability assessment and we look forward to receiving his recommendations later this year."

Employees working longer hours... but no compensation

Almost three quarters of people are working longer hours in 2011 than they were a year ago, according to a firm of accountants and business advisors.

The survey by RSM Tenon found that 70% of respondents are now working more hours per week compared to 2010.

But few people said they were compensated for their extra hours, with just 8% saying they received overtime payment and 6% given time in lieu.

Paul Finitz, RSM Tenon's director of its Derby office's recovery and insolvency service line, said: "People are now being asked to do more for less. Many companies may have over-compensated for the recession and shed more jobs proportionately than the work they have lost. This causes the remaining staff to be overstretched."

RIDDOR change could be backward step, lawyer warns

A proposed change under RIDDOR 1995 to report incidents that lead to a worker being incapacitated for more than seven days rather than three days, as is currently the case, has been described as a potential retrograde move for health and safety.

Steffan Groch, head of regulatory at DWF, addressed delegates at the SHP Legal Arena on the topic of RIDDOR, a week after the HSE's consultation on the proposal closed.

Groch said the jury is still very much out on whether such a change would increase compliance, warning, as well, that the message the impact of the change could send to directors is potentially harmful.

"The message that this gives to boardrooms is that if an incident results in less than seven days off work, then it is not sufficiently serious to tell the HSE." He added that boardrooms might look at falling RIDDOR rates as evidence that "things are getting better" and a reason for possibly reducing investment in health and safety.

The dangerous temptation not to investigate such incidents could lead to lower quality health and safety data and lessons for improvement slipping through the net, he warned.

Summing up, Groch described the change as a potential "backward step for health and safety, adding: "It's another example of the chipping away of what health and safety is all about. It's a slow erosion of what health and safety is built on – good quality statistics and data."

RIDDOR again...Is it still "Ring and Report" ?? Read on...

Work-related injuries and incidents reportable under RIDDOR will have to be notified to the HSE via its website from September this year.

However, those reporting fatal or major incidents will still be able to do so by phone, in recognition of the need for a more personal response in such circumstances.

From 12 September, a suite of seven forms will be available on the HSE's website aiming to make the statutory reporting of work-related injuries, dangerous occurrences, disease, and gas-related incidents quicker and easier.

In another efficiency measure, the HSE will end its Infoline telephone service on 30 September. Instead, it will be encouraging businesses and members of the public seeking information and official guidance on health and safety to visit its website, which it describes as "a huge knowledge bank where people can access and download information free of charge and use interactive Web tools".

The website currently receives 26 million visits a year and has 100 times more visitors than the Infoline has callers. It has recently been enhanced with interactive tools for low-risk businesses and an expanded 'frequently-asked questions' section.

Recession takes toll on young workers' health

Younger workers are more stressed in their jobs and feel under more pressure to work long hours than their older colleagues.

This is one of the key findings from an international study of employee-engagement levels. The study, which questioned more than 30,000 employees in 29 countries, found that although 18 to 29-year-olds are more likely to be free from the biggest responsibilities at work, a larger percentage of them are "frequently" or "nearly always" concerned about their work-life balance and personal health.

Two fifths (39 per cent) of younger employees believe that their employer is using the recession to justify asking them to do more, compared with one in four (24 per cent) older workers. One third (34 per cent) of younger workers are also concerned about having insufficient resources at work to do their job effectively, as opposed to 22 per cent of workers in their sixties.

Forty per cent are frequently stressed at work, while 31 per cent feel pressurised to work long hours – both higher proportions than any other age category. Likewise, 39 per cent of younger employees are unhappy with their work-life balance, and 32 per cent feel that work pressure and stress frequently impacts their health – 5 per cent more than workers in their fifties, and 10 per cent higher than those in their sixties.

The study also found that younger workers are less engaged at work than their older colleagues – just 21 per cent of 18 to 29-year-olds are highly engaged with their employer, compared with 31 per cent in their sixties.

The experience, however, differs from country to country. Businesses in Macedonia, France and Turkey, for example, enjoy a relatively high level of engagement with their younger employees.

The UK features in the bottom half of the table of 29 countries, with 12 per cent of young workers highly engaged with their employer.

Stress at Westminster - perhaps "We're All in This Together" after all...

New MPs are finding the combination of long hours and a heavy workload a struggle, and worry the job is harming their family lives, research suggests.

A survey by the Hansard Society of the 227 MPs elected for the first time in 2010 suggests that, while most MPs had expected to work a 60-hour week, on average they were doing nine hours more.

One said the demands of Westminster and constituency work had a "devastating" impact on their private life.

MPs' hours were changed in 2005 because they were not "family friendly".

The chamber decided to start its proceedings earlier on some days amid complaints that long hours and post-midnight finishes were putting off many people from becoming MPs.

Last year saw an above-average number of newcomers to the Commons after a swathe of former MPs were either forced to stand down, following revelations about their expenses, or chose to retire.

Political research body the Hansard Society canvassed all the new MPs - about a quarter of whom responded - about their experiences during their first year in Parliament. Matt Korris, who compiled the report, said it provided an insight into the challenges faced by MPs.

"These findings underscore the need for a review of the role of MPs, not just to build an improved political system, but for the very well-being of MPs themselves" Korris concluded.

Grayling under fire... HSE on the fire??

Health and safety activist Hilda Palmer has highlighted the impact that proposed and existing government cuts will have on every workplace – not just those traditionally considered “dangerous”.

Ms Palmer challenged the government’s position about so-called non-hazardous workplaces at a Unison conference fringe meeting.

"The government claims that offices shops and schools - the kind of places where Unison members work - are non-hazardous. This is wrong. You are actually quite likely to die of stress-related illnesses," she said.

Ms Palmer said people who work with computers or in call centres are more likely to suffer from muscle and joint disorders.

In her address to the meeting, which was reported in the Press, Hilda Palmer described Department of Work and Pensions Minister Chris Grayling as "hating" health and safety.

She suggested that budgetary cuts to the HSE and the weakening of its position was likely to lead to it being consigned to the “bonfire of the quangos.”

"There is an acceptance that proactive inspections work," she said.

"But they are not taking place in agriculture, which kills more workers per 100,000 than any other industry, manufacturing and the whole of the public sector.

"The idea that work is safe is a lie."

The Coalition Government’s agenda on health and safety, notably remarks made by Chris Grayling and the earlier report from former Government adviser Lord Young came under fire during UNISON’s Local Government and National Delegate Conferences, held between 20 – 24 June at Manchester Central.

Hilda Palmer is a leading spokesperson for the Hazards Campaign. A short preview of this autumn’s National Hazards Conference appears elsewhere in this Newsletter...

More on alleged public sector bullying... GMB investigating.

The GMB has mailed its members who work at Central Bedfordshire Council about the authority’s proposed cuts to pay and conditions. GMB has received responses from members about them and other members of staff being bullied and harassed by managers and councillors within the Authority to accept the proposed changes. This has prompted GMB to undertake a private and confidential survey to ascertain the extent of the problem within central Bedfordshire Council.

The confidential survey is in line with the TUC model. The last survey of the UK carried out by the TUC identified that 5 million employees have been, at one time or another, the subject of some form of bullying at work.

Tony Hughes, GMB Organiser, commented as follows:

"When GMB gets reports of bullying and harassment we act immediately as the effects of can be highly damaging to people and can have long term health effects.

After our mailing to all GMB members working for Central Beds Council, telling them about the council's try-on, that would change their terms and conditions, and that any dismissals arising from it will be unfair and may be causing staff increased difficulties, we got an immediate response from members who told us their are being bullied and harassed.

Some examples of bullying that GMB has been told about involve Central Beds Council staff being warned unofficially that that their 'card will be marked' if they do not sign the proposed new contract, and use of other verbal explicit language from managers and councillors.

The GMB is asking members to complete the survey so that the union can evaluate the depth of the bullying problem and pass on the results to the employer Central Bedfordshire Council whose responsibility it is to make sure that staff are not bullied in the course of their work."

More people working unpaid overtime than ever before

A record 5.26 million people worked unpaid overtime in 2010 - the highest since records began in 1992 - a TUC analysis of official figures has revealed.

The TUC analysis found that over one in five workers (21 per cent) regularly worked unpaid overtime last year, an increase of 0.7 percentage points since 2009 and the highest proportion since 1997.

Last year the 5.26 million people across the UK clocked up an average seven hours 12 minutes unpaid overtime a week, worth £5,485 per person and a record £28.9 billion to the economy.

Public sector workers are the most likely to do unpaid overtime, with over one in four (26.3 per cent) regularly putting in more than seven hours of unpaid overtime a week, compared to around one in six workers in the private sector (18.9 per cent).

Workers in London are most likely to work unpaid overtime (27.8 per cent), followed by the South East (25.3 per cent) and the East of England (23.7 per cent).

Of those workers who do unpaid overtime, Londoners work the most free hours (8 per week), followed by those in the East Midlands (7.5 hours) and the North East and Scotland (both 7.4 hours).

The increasing amount of unpaid overtime worked is likely to be a symptom of tough economic conditions, low recruitment activity and rising unemployment, with staff having to pick up new work as well as the work left over by colleagues who have been made redundant, the TUC believes.

Staff in the public sector put in 702 million hours of unpaid work in 2010. With heavy job losses now hitting the public sector, the amount of unpaid overtime is likely to rise even higher, putting an extra strain on staff already stressed about increasing workloads, pay freezes and increased pensions contributions, says the TUC.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: 'With tough economic conditions making employers reluctant to recruit, existing staff are picking up much of the increasing work load through unpaid hours.

'While most staff are happy to put in some extra free time to help their company through, forcing staff to endlessly put in too many hours could lead to increased stress levels, which can make staff ill and reduce the quality of the work they do.

'Public sector workers - already experiencing a sharp cut in their earnings as they have their pay frozen and pension contributions raised - will be understandably upset about the amount of extra unpaid work they are expected to do with the threat of redundancy looming over them.

Brendan Barber called upon managers and senior executives to be on the lookout for a damaging long hours culture in their workplace and to take steps to protect their workforce.

Autumn is Conference Season...

Hundreds of Health & Safety reps and other activists will already have the dates of the 22nd National Hazards Conference in their diaries. Hazards 2011 will run from **Friday 2nd – Sunday 4th September**. The venue, as last year, is Keele University, near Stoke on Trent. The buildings which will host Hazards Conference stand in the largest and arguably the greenest university campus in the country. The theme of the Conference this year is: "Enforcement cuts mean we need better workplace organization". The absolute deadline for applications is Monday 8th August. For more information, phone **0161 636 7558** or e mail hazconf@gmhazards.org.uk Preparations for our 2011 Stress Network Conference: "From Recession to Depression?" are well under way. The event runs on **Saturday 26th and Sunday 27th November**, at Hillscourt Conference Centre, a well-appointed venue in pleasant rural surroundings but with good transport links to Birmingham. Book early to get the benefit of discounted delegate fees! For full details visit our website www.workstress.net

Blank page