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Work and Equalities Institute Research Briefing

Representation and voice in relation to health and safety: the emerging managerial challenges to worker representation

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Summary

This briefing outlines some of the challenges that health and safety representatives face in the UK in terms of a more hostile working environment and management culture. It shows how the question of representation on such issues as health and safety has become increasingly politicised, and how there are attempts in some cases by management to dislodge the central role of worker representatives.

2023

New management practices

The emergence of management practices linked to a new pattern of production and service delivery has generated a more intensive set of work regimes. For instance, Stewart et al (2009) argues how the emergence of lean production since the 1980s in the UK has been driven by the ideological and economic interest in what were once seen as Japanese forms of production, and that this has changed the nature of control systems and work processes.

The UK is an important case where such systems have been fundamentally pursued and integrated into management approaches and management education (ibid.). This has been coupled with a greater interest in performance management and control, which in cases such as the public sector – for example, the civil service – has led to increasing pressure on the workforce and increasing levels of stress (Carter et al., 2011; 2013).

Indeed, physical levels of exertion are increasingly coupled with rising levels of stress and related mental health problems in areas such as the public sector (Martínez Lucio, 2020). Alongside these developments have been ongoing encroachments by management into the spaces of representation and communication. These have been visible for some time, and the 1990s saw a specific attempt by various cohorts of management to develop more direct forms of communications with workers of an individual (e.g., suggestions schemes) and collective nature (e.g., team briefings and quality circles) (see Bacon and Storey, 2000).

Dual challenge

For this reason, trade union-based health and safety representatives have been facing a dual challenge. On the one hand, we have seen a changing regime of work which allows less space and slack for workers, and which is becoming more intense, thus leading to broader problems in relation to mental health.

On the other, we have seen a new management strategy that has been, in effect, colonising traditional spaces of representation and generating more individualised approaches (Edwards, 2009; MacKenzie and Martínez Lucio, 2014). This operational and political dual challenge has shaped the politics of health and safety since the 1980s and has become more acute in recent years (see Nichols, 1997; Tombs and White, 2010).

Awareness of mental health

Within the workplace, such as across the hospital and university sectors, we have seen increasing use of Employee Assistance Programmes and 'wellbeing champions' by management in an attempt to raise awareness of mental health issues and provide advice of a general nature.

Added to this, the use of consultants to preclude management from being seen as a major cause of stress is not uncommon (Martínez Lucio, 2020). These initiatives also tie in with a general interest in the way happiness at work is reconstructed by management so as to represent critical positions to it – as in the causes of stress, for example – as being un-citizenship like (see Ehrenreich, 2018). This further isolates and stigmatises the role of trade union related health and safety representatives who may increasingly be regarded as troublemakers.

Much of this management response is driven by the ongoing interest and political concern with stress at work amongst workers. Potentially the topic raises major challenges for management prerogative and legitimacy as it also touches on key elements of operational and behavioural aspects of management (LRD, 2018).

Impact on Health and Safety representatives

Since 2010 there have been specific developments in the UK related to the state level that have shaped the immediate environment for health and safety representatives. One factor is related to the decline in the reach and effectiveness of the labour inspectorate related to health and safety (Mustchin and Martínez Lucio, 2020; James and Walters, 2022; 95–110). For example, in 2009 £239.4m was spent on the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), but by 2019 the figure had almost halved to £129m (James and Walters, 2022: 99).

Alongside these drastic cuts in the resourcing of enforcement mechanisms, there has also been an undermining of a raft of regulatory agencies through a political narrative which has stigmatised health and safety in the UK more generally (Mustchin and Martínez Lucio, 2020). This has severely weakened the level of support that health and safety representatives receive from the state and further isolated them within the context of the workplace.

Working practices

In a study of the working practices of labour inspectors (Mustchin and Martínez Lucio, 2022), a set of key changes have been noted in the way they have to cover an ever wider range of sectors. Added to this, trainees are employed at a much earlier stage of development, while the ability of inspectors to network and construct positive and ongoing relations with management and worker representatives is undermined by a lack of physical presence.

The study also looked at the way lean service and performance management principles are used to control and thus undermine the quality of inspectors' work. The result of all these developments is a fundamental disconnect between the workforce and legal enforcement mechanisms, and further fragmentation of workplace health and safety processes.

New actors

Paralleling these developments in terms of the character of regulation, and its enforcement, has been the emergence of a new set of actors aligned to management that have challenged the authority and remit of trade unions in this area.

For instance, the emergence of management consultants and other forms of functional outsourcing in the area of health and safety has meant that management has, in some cases, been able to develop parallel systems of health and safety regulation without the presence of worker representation, let alone unions. Management has also been able to control the processes of risk assessments and to obscure their nature and effectiveness.

Meanwhile the emergence of management consultants is an important development in many parts of the UK's public sector (see Kirkpatrick et al, 2019), and in terms of health and safety has led to a closure of some forms of dialogue and relations.

Renewal of trade union strategy

Despite these changes and challenges, a renewal of trade union strategy in some respects has led to significant innovation in many aspects of health and safety representation.

The growing interest in mental health and wellbeing within trade unions and their health and safety representatives is linked to a range of struggles against work intensification and for employment equality and dignity at work. Indeed, the mental health agenda has been an important rallying point for training programmes and strategies developed within the trade union movement, and also for worker health and safety representatives independently through their own networks. This has been accentuated by the pandemic which pushed many of these issues to the forefront of industrial relations agendas and subsequent disputes (Taylor, 2023).

Issues of stress, remote working, work-life balance and others have begun to move to the centre of industrial relations discussions, and trade unions have seen a greater level of interest and engagement within their members and representatives with such issues. This suggests that specialised and focused representation within trade unions can generate new spaces, new initiatives, and new agendas in the sphere of work.

Note:

The briefing is based on a section of a book chapter to be published in 2024 by Miguel Martínez Lucio and Stephen Mustchin. *The Changing Role of the Health and Safety Representative in the UK: Between a hostile regulatory environment and the expansion of health and safety agendas* (details are available from the authors).

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