**Mental Health and Fair Work**

For trade unions it comes as no surprise that, increasingly, workers are being exposed of risk to harm to their mental health and wellbeing. In the worst cases, in the absence of effective interventions workplace stress can lead to anxiety, depression and workers have been known to take their own lives due to work induced mental illness.

Trade unions have been campaigning since the early 90's on workplace stress, when employers began to enforce change on workers in terms of their job roles and design as emerging technologies of the time led to increased monitoring of work. Many were forced to take on new roles with little training or, where they did get access to training, it proved inadequate to equip the worker such significant changes in job roles.

For much of that time trade unions have been the lone voice, campaigning for mentally safer workplaces and for employers to recognize the risk to health caused by stress at work and challenging employers and their occupational health providers to take workplace stress and the impact on mental health seriously.

Many years later the imposition of workplace re-organization and restructuring, without adequate consultation remain significant factors in workers being exposed to intolerable levels of stress that, if not managed properly, can lead to long term mental ill-health to such an extent that workers contemplate, or indeed do carry out suicide.

The increasing use of zero-hour contracts and other forms of precarious employment are exposing growing number of workers, mainly young workers to new workplace stressors; job and financial insecurity. Exploitative zero-hour contracts leave workers with no control over working hours or indeed how much money they will be able to earn, and if their earnings will be sufficient to meet living costs such as rent, food or even travel to work.

The financial insecurity and misery caused by hardship creates stress on individuals, stress that will often impact of the workers capability at work, a relationship that employers all too often ignore choosing to focus more on the personal stressors and not making the connection with the pressures they put on workers that can expose workers to risk of poor mental ill health.

Scottish Hazards believes it is time for work related suicide and overwork to be treated as work related fatalities and employers who fail to pot in place

proper preventative measures to prevent harm to workers mental health, especially when that harm is so great they take their own lives.

The TUC carries out a biennial survey of health and safety reps seeking to identify trends in occupational ill health and gather information on the cases health and safety reps are taking forward on behalf of their members.

The last five surveys have shown a steady change in the key concerns being reported with MSDs;  back pain carpel tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, muscle strain etc. towards psychological concerns sic as injury and  illness caused by stress as a result of unrealistic demands on the individual, often as bullying and harassment,  or the implementation of draconian workplace policies such as sickness absence or performance improvement procedures far too often leading to workers losing their jobs,  when the answer should be to provide supportive work environments that recognize mental health as a work related condition.

These conditions, including anxiety and depression, can have a significant impact on the lives of those affected and, if not addressed leave workers with increasing mental health problems and employers open to increased risk of litigation and reputational damage for failing to protect staff.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government has given a commitment to ensuring fair work underpins a growing and strong Scottish economy by the year 2025. We now can look at we can use fair work to make workplaces mentally healthier, with everyone enjoying the benefits fair work can deliver.

Fair work has five dimensions, effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect.

Within each of these dimensions opportunities exist for employers, trade unions and workers to engage positively to make the world of work mentally healthier for all.


**Effective Voice**

Effective employee voice provides the platform for positive dialogue, allowing examination of employer's policies and procedures in a positive and constructive manner to ensure they
adversely impact on poor workplace mental health.

However, the reality is that trade union reps continue to report aggressive implementation of performance improvement and sickness absence management procedures placing an increasing burden on trade union reps' casework, at the same time many reps say that employer's policies may be written in supportive language, but the implementation is often different.

Workers fear being subjected to these policies and the risk of sanction of workers these policies provide can be the catalyst for stress related illness manifesting itself in the more serious forms, anxiety and depression to name but two.

Employers should work with trade unions to improve the effectiveness of employee voice mechanisms, using that voice to consult with the workforce, revue existing workplace policies and their implementation to ensure they support workers with mental health problems, encourage workers to disclose mental ill health and do not discriminate against them for doing so.

**Opportunity**

Fair work recognizes the importance of opportunity for all, the chance for everyone to secure employment and to access training and development opportunities and progress in their careers regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity and disability.

Quite often workers in these groups will have mental health problem associated with their protected characteristic;

For example, many disabled people have poor mental health associated with their disability and young workers or older colleagues may find that their mental will be impacted by unrealistic demands in the workplace, quite often because of inadequate support and development and an unwillingness from employers to provide reasonable adjustments.

It is important to recognize the risks the ageing workforce face, particularly in relation to their mental health, as workers are forced to work for longer while, at the same time, the world of work and job roles do not adapt to meet the need of a rapidly changing workplace demography.

Trade union equality reps have a role to play in challenging inequality in the workplace. However, employers must recognize their worth and not place barriers in place, such as denying facility time, preventing them carrying out their role.

Equality reps need a more effective voice along with training and development to support workers with mental health problems in the workplace helping facilitate continuing employment or a successful and sustainable return to work after absence.

Positive dialogue between trade unions and employers as part of an industrial strategy to deliver fair work could enhance to role of equality reps and make a real difference providing equality and opportunity for workers with poor mental health.

**Security**

Security was identified by the Fair Work Convention as necessary in delivering fair work, this is an important dimension when considering mental health in the workplace, both for those in work with mental health problems as well as the wider emerging labour market and the increasing risk to workers mental health it poses.

In relation to the former, research by the Mental Health Foundation and Unum in 2016 shows that workers with mental health problems recognize the benefits good work has on their health and wellbeing. Not just financial security but the security provided by human interaction with colleagues.

If this is taken away, particularly in cases where the individual has no choice then the resulting insecurity places already vulnerable workers at greater risk.

The modern world of work also places the mental health of workers at risk, increasing use of precarious employment, bogus self-employment, austerity and the United Kingdom's deregulatory agenda means our workplaces offer less secure employment and, trade unions would argue, workplaces where the risk to injury and health are greater.

The HSE has 60% of the resources it had pre-financial meltdown, losing 40% in the name of austerity, it cannot force employers to implement the stress management standards and occupational ill-health was, for many years not seen as a priority but, thankfully, it is now placing a greater emphasis on health at work, including mental health.

Developing fair work through constructive dialogue employers and trade unions can provide secure employment where very worker has a voice and where that voice is valued in driving change in the workplace.


**Fulfillment**

Providing fulfilling work, where everybody feels empowered and to some extent in control over their work, workload and where and how it is delivered provides the foundation for work that can help those with mental health problems remain at work.

Fulfilling work aligns the tasks, work environment and employment conditions to skills, talents and aspirations of individuals. Having or developing poor mental health does not mean a worker loses any of these skills, talents or aspirations but perhaps they need more understanding from employers and colleagues on how the demands of work interact with their mental health and what reasonable adjustments need to be made to help them remain at work, manage their mental health in the work environment better so their employer can continue to utilize their skills.

**Respect**

The greatest barrier to the last fair work dimension, respect, is the continuing stigma many workers with mental health problems face in the workplace. The Fair Work Convention, during its consultation with workers, identified a disconnect between workplace policies aimed at delivering respect, such as policies on stress, bullying, harassment, equality and diversity and the reality of workplace behaviours.

Stigma may also prevent workers from reporting mental health problems accurately; linked with the dimension of security; workers often fear they will place themselves at greater risk of insecure futures if they report mental health problems, particularly if they feel doing so will endanger their employment.

Using fair work and an effective employee voice to review and develop policies that are visible in their implementation and deliver tangible results will not only result in more respectful workplaces but also workplaces workers will be more confident in disclosing mental health problems for what they are.

The fair work agenda is challenging but employers who engage with their workers will get the benefits, staff will be more engaged, more likely to suggest innovative solutions to problems including the impact of mental health in the work environment

Trade unions have played a crucial role in developing the fair work agenda along with employers and unions have the workplace expertise to make fair work a reality. However, many workers in non-unionized workplaces will have to rely on employer goodwill to adopt fair work as a principle underpinning its industrial relations, perhaps, as a result many will be denied the opportunity to make the transition to mentally healthy workplaces that fair work could deliver.

We need to look at how we can work with other organizations, such as the Mental Health Foundation and Scottish Hazards, a trade union backed occupational health charity to use fair work to make all workplaces, those with unions and those without, mentally healthier.

**Scottish Hazards**
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