

## November 2011 Stress Network Conference Report – From Recession to Depression?

Hillscourt Centre, Rednal



It is surprising how quickly the year passes by and November brings together 80 enthusiastic Trade Union delegates at the Hillscourt Conference Centre located to the southwest of Birmingham. We are grateful to NASUWT for the continued use of their residential conference premises.



This year's theme was easy to identify given the unrelenting and unwelcome pressures imposed by the post-recession recovery strategies adopted and enforced by the Coalition Government in addition to the persistently scurrilous attacks on Health & Safety law and its alleged bureaucratic burdens on business.

**Nick Green**, Conference Chairman opened the main plenary session by welcoming everyone to a very timely opportunity for discussion of the key issues that were being experienced by many hundreds of thousands of UK workers. Nick said:-

"The austerity measures embarked on by this administration are now really affecting working people in all sectors and in all parts of the country.

These misguided and politically motivated attacks on the working conditions, pensions, delivery of services, and welfare provisions are now reflected in survey upon survey that highlights stress in the workplace as the number one concern of workers.

We are being expected to pay, not only with increased demands, less job security, and an expectation of one-sided flexibility, but also, and very worryingly, with reduced or even non-existent protections in the name of business. Never in my lifetime has there been such a coordinated and sustained attack on the basic human right to be able to leave work as safely and as well as when we went into work, or on the right to fair protection from unscrupulous employers who will soon be able to dismiss staff at will.

I do not believe that this attack is based on a need to make Britain competitive, Margaret Thatcher put paid to that aspiration 20 years ago!! No, this attack is driven by an ideology that puts working people at the bottom of the pile and re-categorizes them as expendable cannon fodder so that the rich can get richer and the rest of us can go hang. This clearly is the Tory's race to the bottom. It is no wonder therefore that stress is now seen as the no 1 concern in the workplace.

This Conference will not just recognise the damage being done, but will be looking at constructive ways in which we can campaign against the causes of workplace stress. We see ourselves as central to the struggle against the austerity measures being thrust upon us all by Government who failed to stop the gamblers of the finance industry from robbing us all. We should not be paying for the criminality or negligence of others."

Tarani Chandola, Nick Green and Rachael Maskell



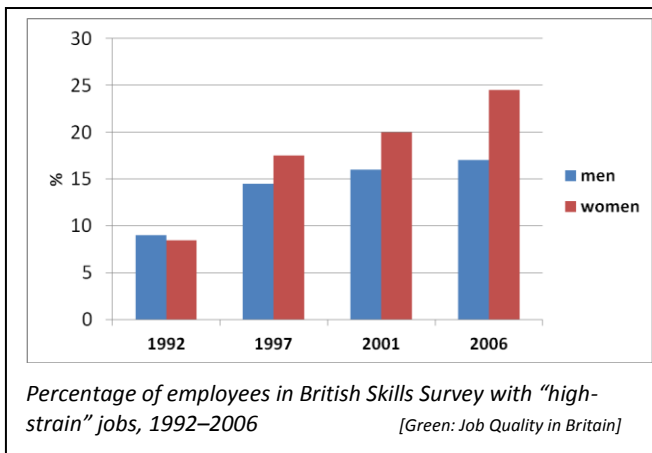
Following the formal opening of Conference, keynote speakers, Professor Tarani Chandola [CCSR & Manchester University], Rachael Maskell [Senior Official, Health Sector UNITE the union] and Ian Draper [Convenor, UK National Work-stress Network] were invited to address conference.

**Professor Chandola** began the proceedings by outlining findings from his research relating to the impact of the recession both on those left in work, as well as those who had been unfortunate to lose their employment.

He has published this work entitled [Stress at Work](#) "A report compiled for the British Academy".

The focus was on the impact of the recession 2008-2009, and subsequent increased levels of psychosocial stressors in Britain alongside greater job insecurity [doubled in the Public Sector since 2009], additional work intensification, and more inter-personal conflict in the workplace.

The public sector in particular was shown to have been affected much more by bullying managers and longer work hours compared to private sector workers. It was evident that from 2010 with its emergency budget effects, stress levels in the public sector would continue to rise. The costs of this



increase in ill health would need to be balanced against the government imposed cuts. Research evidence showed that stress and associated illness had been on the increase since 1992 and that these trends were particularly marked for women. In addition, there had been a 4-6% increase in most stressors across the one year period to spring 2010. The benefits gained through application of more flexible work arrangements appeared to have been reversed by the recession.

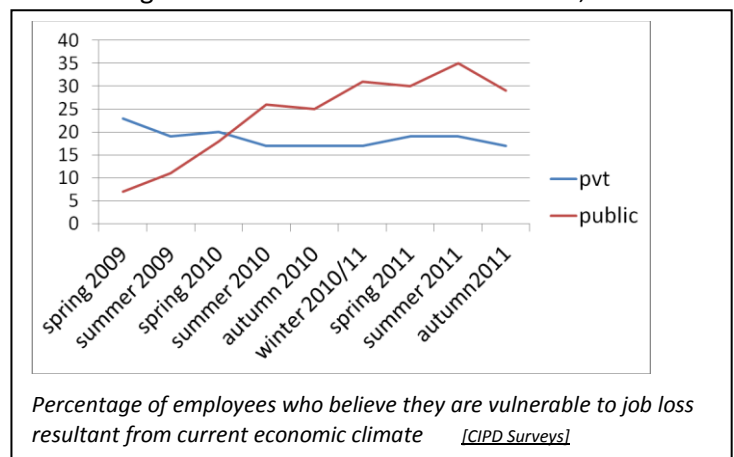
Workers were reporting greater dissatisfaction with work-life balance,

organisational support in securing an acceptable balance and working hours increasing since 2009.

Work stressors were shown to be linked with a range of health outcomes, including depression, anxiety disorders and workplace injury, accidents as well as increased cardiovascular risks and suicides. Although one might expect the recession to create higher levels of stress-related absence, fear of job-loss caused many not to take time off work. This would in turn lead to greater presenteeism when workers were more likely to attend and underperform, leading to greater impact for employers and society.

The costs of stress lay between 0.5% and 1.2% of UK GDP. Employer costs were much lower than for individuals and society in general.

Professor Chandola spoke also about strategies for the reduction of work-stress, referring to stress management training and organisational interventions – these would usually create positive outcomes for both the organisations as well as the individuals.



Despite the introduction in 2004 of the HSE Stress Management Standards, there had been minimal decline in work stressors in the UK, indeed there was evidence that they had increased since 2009. Anecdotally the Network's findings based on enquiries and attendance at seminars for Union branches would support this view.

The recently introduced ‘fit-notes’ could potentially increase the likelihood of success in the courts for individual claims, however there remained a need for increased training for health professionals regarding the suggestion of appropriate work stress interventions for patients with associated illnesses. Legal processes continued to remain difficult channels through which to pursue cases.

UNITE the Union’s **Rachael Maskell**, Senior Officer in the Health Sector addressed conference, exploring the issues related to UNITE



Rachael Maskell and Tarani Chandola

members and workers in the wider aspects of the economy. Tackling the issue across the board, Rachael examined individual and organisational effects of work-related stress, and she covered a number of changed environment factors that were now emerging. It was noted that within the newer employment trends, there was a marked intensification of work, personal behaviours were changing

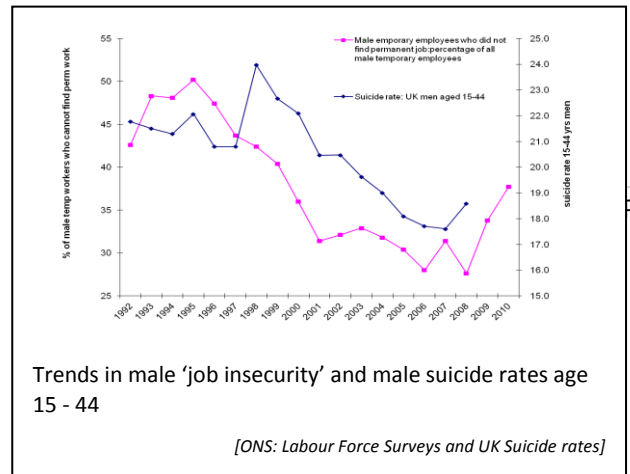
and there appeared to be reduced training in management skills. The entire issue of work-stress remained largely misunderstood, within a poor legislative framework, and lack of adequate, appropriate, understood and effective preventative policies in place. It was clear to all that the recession and its immediate follow-up had created massive insecurities in employment, finances, working patterns and increased demands.

The “Well-being at Work” agenda still seemed to be being pressed, however there was a misunderstanding that more was needed. In addition, there were continued excessive bullying and harassment issues; a distinct lack of comprehension of life-work balance, sitting alongside a lack of application of duty of care. Within various work sectors, UNITE had found through its surveys that the Not for Profit Sector revealed over 92% of respondents reporting high work stress levels, with significant changes in work perspective, and showing organisational culture shifts underpinned by poor change management processes. Surveys revealed in May 2010 that the £80bn+ cuts created major job losses leaving behind massive insecurity and huge work overload for those left. The Government’s ‘Big Society’ approach was being pressed forward to encourage a different approach to supporting societal needs through voluntary approaches covering the gaps now being left by public sector reductions in service.

Within NHS and Local Government sickness absence rates were now 10.6 and 9.6 average days lost respectively. Changes to both sectors were anticipated through the Health & Social Care and Localism Bills, and significant pay and pensions issues had obtained massive publicity with a major public sector strike day quite imminent – something the like of which had not been seen for many decades.

Anecdotal evidence, backed up by case-histories showed that individuals were now more likely to face bullying, longer and increasing hours, unpaid overtime, presenteeism; and adverse effects on personal health and well-being as well as on relationships and family life. Alternatives to the status quo were now much harder to identify.

The current attacks on legal case routes, Health & Safety Laws and their application, possible undermining of the Safety Representatives Regulations as well as the continued attitude in UK to the Working Time Regulations and the newly created Equalities legislation, all were evidence of a growing threat to the collective and individual workforce, which unions had a duty to oppose and to fight.



Rachael also explored workplace solutions and considered the importance of management responses, especially in the areas of Personnel Management and its training and application. The UNITE Stress-busters Campaign had been successful in 2010 and much of the message was still relevant. A toolkit for representatives had been developed, and greater emphasis on Mental Health at Work was becoming a higher priority message, with back up support through organisations like MIND and TUC. No matter where one turned, the business case was always clear to see, and employers and managers who ignored that element of their work did so at risk of serious problems arising.

In conclusion, Rachael reminded Conference that almost 11million working days per annum were lost; during the 2010/11 period over 210,000 new cases had emerged, and that added to the just under 190,000 pre-existing cases. Significantly the highest caseload now concerned 35-54 year old women, especially those in large workplaces; many were managers and professionals themselves. She also noted that within Health, Social Care, Public Administration and Education, stress case reports [24%] were now over doubled compared to 2010 [10%].

It was clear that the challenge ahead required a better understanding of Stress in the Workplace; the need for better regulation and enforcement, and higher prioritisation by unions of their campaigning on work-stress.

To succeed, we needed to create higher priorities for Stress on Trade Union and the Government's agendas, and carry the message forward to protect the workforce from the current ravages, now being experienced.

The Saturday plenary session concluded with a presentation from **Ian Draper** of the UK National Work Stress Network. In the unexpected and unfortunate absence of Bristol City UNISON Steward, Mark White due to family illness, the final plenary session was rearranged and Ian explored general background issues to work-stress, emphasising that it is not about weakness, perceived or otherwise, and noting that work overload is a key factor in the potential destruction of good healthy living. The interface of personal and home issues versus those specific to work was considered, and it was confirmed that neither aspect could be separated from the other – as we cannot leave our home stresses indoors nor can we leave our work stress on the office desk.



Ian Draper addressing delegates

Looking at the causes, effects and symptoms of stress and examining briefly the TUC Safety representatives' online surveys, the session moved on to consider various aspects of the legal issues surrounding work-stress, in terms of those statutes that were in the armoury of weapons, the many keynote legal precedential cases and some of their outcomes, versus the various legal obstacles to taking cases of personal injury and negligence against employers.

The Network's recommended simple risk assessment-based branch audit form was suggested as a useful tool for local use. How the local union and national platform messages should be taken out to members was an important element in the work of elected TU Stewards and Safety Representatives.

Ian considered what Judith Hackitt the Chair of HSE, might have said, having declined to attend the conference, on the basis for life work balance and family needs! She had addressed a national UNISON Safety Representatives' Conference not long after the election and the presentation by Government of its 35% cuts agenda for HSE. Ian suspected that she would have said that despite the cuts in funding, staffing, activity, enforcement etc, HSE would still deliver its core function. It was clear that the HSE had rolled over and submitted almost without trace of objection, that despite the protestations of TUC, Trade Unions and of course the Hazards Campaign and its organisations.

In conclusion, Ian highlighted a series of press cuttings all of which related specifically to the effects of recession on a large segment of the UK workforce, both public and private. Delegates were able to read about suicides, unfair treatments, the linking by the PM of the summer riots to the H&S Agenda and excessive bureaucracy, high levels of youth and other unemployment, research findings that showed a distinct rise in bullying and harassment at work.

In summary the Network's aims and expectations were highlighted as follows:-

- ▶ **Improved legislation and realistic effective enforcement of H&S from an enlarged HSE**
- ▶ **Effective, meaningful consideration of the needs of the workforce**
- ▶ **A Government committed to getting the economy back on track without the massive slash and burn approach**
- ▶ **A reduction in the massive attacks on the public sector and its loyal devoted passionate workers**
- ▶ **True understanding of the realities of stress and its associated illnesses and a commitment to Duty of Care**
- ▶ **Trades Unions and their members willing to stand up and oppose the onslaught on Health & Safety**
- ▶ **Trades Unions protecting and supporting their own lay casework officers' health and well-being in supporting members**
- ▶ **A realistic LIFE-Work Balance for all**

The session closed with wide ranging discussion through questions from the floor to all panel members.

**Workshops** during the Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning sessions provided opportunities for delegates to attend some topics more than once. Choices were made prior to attendance at conference or on arrival. Stewards' Stress and Management Standards were the more popular workshops and were well attended, and acclaimed to have been really excellent topics with good approaches and advice. Single sessions were provided for Privatisation effects, Negative Behaviours in the workplace and for Body mapping. We also put on a focus group specifically for NHS delegates related to ongoing research work into bullying and negative behaviours in the workplace.

**Negative Behaviours Focus Group** *Rachael Pope, UKWSN, CSP*

This research focus group looked at the topic of organisational responses to negative behaviour between staff in the NHS. [Negative behaviour is a term to describe a broad range of behaviours including incivility, aggression, bullying, harassment and abuse.] This was an NHS-only activity aimed towards the completion of part-time Doctorate Studies with Manchester Business School.

**TU Stewards and Safety Representatives' Stress** *Vaughan Skirrey and Bob Woods, UNISON & UKWSN*

**Are your trade union duties causing you stress?**

Trade union work can itself be a stressful experience. Our own research has found that many representatives are burned out or overloaded by unrealistic expectations, over-identification, unreasonable work-life balance, demanding members etc. In the current climate of austerity,

massive job losses and increasingly oppressive employment practices, this seems set to become a major issue. The focus was upon the stress that trade union reps encounter. Using case studies and the views of serving union reps, the sessions identified and discussed major sources of stewarding stress. It was very clear that sharing these experiences could all too easily make us feel even worse; therefore we took a "What Works..." approach, and asked delegates to construct a survival kit for use in these difficult and challenging times!

**The impact of Outsourcing and Privatisation** *Steve Wrighton & Michael Longstaff, POA*

Working in the Public Sector is difficult with the possibility of "outsourcing" of areas of your workplace.

What happens if the workforce will be subjected to market testing? That's what is happening to the Prison Service at an alarming rate. Nine prisons are subject to this process at the present time and Kenneth Clarke has stated that it is his ambition to do this to over 70 prisons by the end of this Parliament.

Staff are expected to work more for no extra reward with less staff, poorer pensions and the risk of even successful establishments reducing their staffing levels by 50%. Add to all this, the violence, self harm and mental health problems we face from a clientele who do not wish to be there.

The purpose of this workshop was to devise a strategy to challenge all these issues within the Public Sector ensuring the safe working and living environment to all concerned in any area of employment.

**Stress and the recession effects on workloads** *Ian Draper, UKWSN*

"UK workers work the longest hours in Europe, while workloads continue to increase. How do unions monitor and control risks and unhealthy workloads? How much help can we expect from the enforcer?"

"Excessive workload is the most frequent cause of work-related stress according to TUC and TU surveys, and excess workload generally is climbing the list of identified problems. Job loss and the redistribution of the former workers' tasks increase workload factors almost exponentially.

"The HSE has retreated behind the perceived need to slash government spending, while the economy lurches on without any real direction."

The workshop explored current stress factors, examined simple audits and considered how workplaces and managers should respond to current increasing stress levels. Action plans were produced and are reported on in the workshop report.

**The HSE Stress Management Standards** *Les Roberts, UKWSN*

In TUC surveys over the years, Trade Union Safety Representatives in all employment sectors have consistently ranked stress as one of the most serious health and safety issues in their places of work. Many say this is their number one problem. This Workshop discussed the importance of the HSE Stress Management Standards against the background of sustained Government attacks on health and safety. It examined the need for the Standards, what they are, how they can be applied and the various tools available to employees and employers to help in tackling the present crippling causes and consequences of excessive and damaging workplace stress.

Drawing on experiences, members of the Workshop produced a simple health and safety based plan of action aimed at tackling this serious problem.

**Organisational responses to negative behaviours between staff in the workplace**

*Rachael Pope, UKWSN, CSP*

Delegates attending this workshop explored the topic of organisational responses to negative behaviour between staff in the workplace. It was an opportunity also to try to understand why people in organisations sometimes behave in very strange ways that do not seem to be rational.

Group work and general discussions developed ideas to take back to the workplace. Rachael also shared some early thoughts, and possible answers from her doctorate studies and research.

### **Body Mapping and Workplace Mapping a means to identifying stress sources**

*Sue Bennett UNITE and Helen O'Neil NASUWT and UKWSN*

It has long been known that the body indicates where problems lie and that aches and pains can be linked to stressful situations. In turn absence data and other information can also show how specific job areas and tasks in the workplace can attract high stress levels. This workshop examined how we can identify these problem areas and what actions can then be suggested to employers to eradicate those problems.

The regular aches and pains we all know have some kind of root cause. Is it work? If so how does it manifest itself? What could we do to identify it, and what can management do to help prevent it?

Detailed reports of workshop sessions and outcomes are recorded separately on the Conference Report page 2011.

## Thanking You

We would like to thank everyone who contributed – the invited speakers, all delegates and Network Members who attended, once more making this a most successful weekend. Our thanks go especially to Workshop facilitators, Network Steering Group members for their huge efforts to make the conference work well. We also extend our thanks to Hillscourt and its staff for the superb hospitality we always receive.

We are pleased to confirm that delegate evaluation outcomes showed that everyone felt that it had been time well spent, and indeed in some cases prompted delegates to go back to Branch to urge greater action and further support not only for members but also for Hazards Campaign and the work of this Network.

Ian Draper, Network Convenor

January 2012.