



Young workers' occupational health and safety

RMT is campaigning to ensure our young members are safe at work – and that they and their safety reps are aware of the occupational risks faced by young workers and the legal protections that exist to protect young workers against injury. Workplaces with safety reps are safer workplaces, hence our campaign to recruit more RMT members into this union safety role.

Why focus on young workers' occupational health and safety?

Health and Safety Executive stats shows that men aged 16 - 24 face a 40% higher risk of all workplace injury than men aged 45-54.

Younger workers face an extended working life, due to the state pension age increasing and no defined age to retire, meaning that young workers may have up to a 55-year work span - it is not fully understood how this will affect workers' health.

Legislation

Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, "Protection of Young Persons", Regulation 19, states that employers have specific legal responsibility for those under 18 years of age, whether they be a worker, are on work experience, or are an apprentice.

Additionally, young workers are protected by the same safety legislation which applies to all workers. For more information on this legislation see RMT's Health and Safety Handbook: <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/publications/health-and-safety-handbook/>

There are also more general responsibilities on employers of young people. The EU occupational health and safety organisation explains that 18 to 24-year-olds are more likely to have a serious accident at work than older adults, which if they are exposed to poor working conditions, could lead to the development of occupational illnesses while still young, or later in life.

Risks to young people

Young workers are new to the workplace, and therefore may:

- lack experience and not take seriously enough the risks that they face
- lack both physical and psychological maturity
- have insufficient skills and training
- not be aware of their rights and their employer's duties
- not have the confidence to speak out
- be eager to impress or please people they work with
- be unaware of how to raise concerns.

Additionally, employers may not recognise the additional protection that young workers need.

Young people are particularly at risk of injury in the first six months of a job, as they may be less aware of any risks.

Training and supervision

Young people need clear and sufficient instruction, training and supervision, so that they understand the importance of health and safety and can work without putting themselves and other people at risk. They may need more supervision than adults.

RMT Health and safety representatives

Health and safety reps can play a valuable role early on by:

- introducing the young person to the workplace
- helping with their ongoing training
- giving employers feedback about concerns.

Risk assessment

Employers should review their risk assessments before the young person starts - and RMT safety reps should be involved in the risk assessment review process.

Risk levels

Many RMT members work in potentially high-risk environment; therefore, employers should:

- consider the work the young person will be doing or observing, the risks involved and how they are managed
- satisfy themselves that the instruction, training, and supervisory arrangements have been properly thought through, and work in practice.

Employers should consider specific factors that must be managed for young people, including exposure to:

- noise and vibration
- toxic substances
- extreme temperatures.

(NB Where these factors exist, employers should already have control measures in place).

Harmful exposure means exposure that has long-term health effects on a still-developing young body. Employers should be aware of the substances young workers might come into contact with, consider exposure levels and ensure legal limits are met.

Employers are also obliged to consider legally-required age limits on the use of some equipment and machinery.

RMT's campaign to recruit young safety reps will improve safety standards

Currently the majority of RMT safety reps are aged over 45, with the largest number of RMT safety reps in their 50s. We are campaigning to encourage younger members to take up the role. This will help improve workplace safety for all - as safety reps bring valuable skills and resources to help employees and co-workers. Safety reps are independent of the employer; they raise concerns with the employer to improve workplace safety and deal with specific problems that arise at work. They have a legal right to carry out regular workplace safety inspections and to inspect employers' documents which relate to the health, safety and welfare of their members. They promote better health and safety in the workplace.

For more information contact RMT health and safety section at healthandsafety@rmt.org.uk