

### Unite action: employer charging for PPE – North West

Polish workers at a retail distribution warehouse in the North West were being charged for personal protective equipment such as work boots. The first thing the Unite shop steward told these members was that they should not be paying for their boots. As a result of Unite action the money they had paid for their protective equipment was refunded.

## Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2006 apply to all workers in Great Britain, and to those offshore activities within the scope of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, except the crews of sea-going ships, aircraft, or hovercraft moving under their own power.

Employers (and mine or quarry managers) are responsible for action at the workplace, and employees must cooperate with their employers programme to prevent hearing damage. Machine designers, manufacturers, importers and suppliers also have duties.

Workplace noise may be a hazard for many Unite members. According to HSE statistics, 170,000 people in the UK suffer deafness, tinnitus or other conditions as a result of excessive exposure to noise at work.

Examples of noisy workplaces may be (this list is not definitive): pubs, restaurants and clubs, transport, metal processing, engineering, driving, construction, textile processing and sewing shops, forestry, repetitive assembly work, food and drink manufacture, beer and soft drinks distribution, agriculture (including animal noise eg pig feeding), call centres, offices and quarrying.

### Is there a noise problem in your workplace? There may be if:

- You have to shout or raise your voice to be heard by someone else one metre away.
- You have ringing in your ears or suffer from temporary deafness after work. This is a warning sign that your hearing may be at risk. In time, temporary deafness could turn into permanent and irreversible hearing loss, so act now.

### Some health effects of exposure to loud noise

**noise-induced hearing loss:** this can be caused by prolonged exposure to loud noise and affects both ears.

**tinnitus:** whistling, ringing, hissing buzzing or roaring in the ears – this can be painful and may lead to sleep disturbance.

**acoustic trauma** occurs when exposed to a loud noise for a short period of time eg an explosion.

### perforated eardrum

**Hyperacusis** can develop after sudden exposure to high sound levels – the sufferer may find certain sounds uncomfortable or painfully loud when others don't – and can be made worse by exposure to noise at work.

Exposure to noise has been linked to heart disease and high blood pressure and may contribute to **fatigue** and **stress**.

**Pregnant workers** exposed to high noise levels at work may experience increased blood pressure and tiredness. Noise can affect the hearing of the unborn child.

**Social exclusion** can arise from hearing loss for example inability to use the telephone, have conversations on social situations, feeling that others don't understand what you are going through.

Employers have a legal duty to protect their employees from the harmful effects of noise at work. Noise-induced hearing loss is **preventable**.

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 require employers to prevent or reduce risks to health and safety from exposure to noise at work.

These regulations require employers to:

- Assess the risks to employees from noise at work.
- Reduce the noise exposure which produces those risks.
- Provide hearing ear protection if the noise exposure cannot be reduced enough by using other methods.
- Consult safety representatives about the provision of ear protection.
- Make sure the legal limits on noise exposure are not exceeded.
- Provide workers with information, instruction and training.
- Carry out health surveillance where there is a risk to health.

The regulations require employers to take action at certain levels. These are:

- Lower exposure action value of a daily or weekly exposure of 80 dB.
- Upper exposure action value of a daily or weekly exposure of 85dB.

At the **lower exposure action level** the employer must provide information on the risk and what measures can be taken to protect hearing. Your employer must also provide ear protectors free of charge and ensure that these are kept in good working order. Employers must make every effort to reduce noise levels as far as possible by modifying or replacing equipment and carry out regular maintenance. Another preventive measure would be enclosing noise areas to muffle the sound.

At the **upper exposure action level** – if the daily noise level reaches 85dB(A) ear protection must be provided by your employer and it must be worn. Your employer must ensure that ear protection is worn and keep it in good condition. Your employer must also clearly mark ear protection zones, where ear protection must be worn.

**Exposure limit values:** these are levels of noise exposure which must not be exceeded – a maximum daily or weekly is 87 dB and the maximum peak sound pressure of is 140 dB.

These regulations became law in 2006 (and did not apply to the music and entertainment sectors until 2008) so many employers have not yet taken action to implement them at work. It is not simply a case of providing ear protection as other noise prevention measures must be considered first.

### Unite safety reps take action on noise at work

We were experiencing a lot of noise from one of our printing machines. With the co-operation of the management we conducted a noise survey. It transpired that we were working over the legal limit and the noise had to be reduced. Again with the co-operation of the management, ear defenders were issued until the problem was rectified.

### Safety Reps' Action Points

Ensure you are consulted about workplace noise prevention measures including ear protection.

Negotiate a policy on noise reduction measures.