Manufacturing update 10: Returning to work – we’ve got your back!

Following the confusion and anxiety caused by the Prime Minister’s latest announcements on loosening the lockdown, I wanted to update you on what we expect to see from both government and employers as we move back to work in a phased and safe way. All workers have the right to a safe place of work and employers the duty to provide one. While we would always urge workers to act collectively, you have a protected right to leave a place of danger if you feel unsafe (Section 44, Employment Rights Act 1996) and if you do, your union will stand with you - we’ve got your back!

Discussions with government on a safe return to work have been patchy and following our criticism of initial draft guidance we have not seen any further drafts. The guidance to be published on safe workplaces highlighted by the Prime Minister, has not been seen by the trade unions.

⇒ Our convenors’ survey has provided us with a wealth of detailed evidence on safe working as well as best practice, ensuring we can collectively learn the lessons from our frontline.
⇒ In addition, analysis of Covid-19 risks and necessary control measures introduced with our support, has informed our discussions with government and industry federations on practical measures to implement as part of a safe return to work for those that have been on furlough.
⇒ We are in the process of producing a ‘COVID-19 Best Practice Guide’ to a safe return to work for our manufacturing sectors. We will circulate shortly to officers and representatives on the ground.

OUR KEY DEMANDS FOR ANY SAFE RETURN TO WORK:

⇒ Any guidance issued by government on safe workplaces must be ‘clear instruction’ not ‘consideration’ and signpost ‘best practice’ developed by industry on the ground.
⇒ A return to work must be governed by science not politics and avoid any risk of a second wave.
⇒ Covid-19 Risk Assessments must be carried out with the full involvement of Health and Safety Representatives. A clear hierarchy of control measures must be followed to address any identified risks; Elimination, Substitution, Engineering Controls, Administrative Controls and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
⇒ PPE is, and must remain, a last resort in the control of any identified risks.
⇒ Social distancing must be enforced; a clear test, trace and isolate strategy must be in place and facilities for regular hand washing must be available.
⇒ Risk Assessments must be published to ensure transparency and allow for effective monitoring.
⇒ Our 100,000 trained Health and Safety Representatives should be released to work with and guide employers and workers across the economy as part of a comprehensive ‘safe return plan’.
⇒ A safe return to work must be phased and coordinated; schools, childcare and public transport will need to be safely re-opened and/or increasing capacity to safely accommodate workers travelling to and from work and respecting social distancing measures at all times.
⇒ Workers must know their rights and how to exercise them. Clear information must be provided and publicly posted in workplaces.

Our detailed Unite Risk Assessment guide for officers and representatives can be downloaded at https://unitetheunion.org/media/3069/009-riskassessandprocedures-2020-05-07.pdf

In solidarity

Steve Turner
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