

Communication Workers Union

Workers Memorial Day DWP Public Consultation On Official UK Recognition

**Response to the Consultative Document issued
by Department for Work and Pensions.**

The Communication Workers Union Response

By

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September 2009

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Introduction

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is the biggest union for the communications industry in the UK with 250,000 members. We represent members in postal, administrative, financial and telephone companies including Royal Mail Group and BT Group, o2, Virgin Media, Orange, ComputaCenter and the Alliance and Leicester. Our members' expertise includes delivery, distribution, processing, engineering (electronic, electrical, lifts, mechanical, gas, plumbing, motor vehicle, manufacturing), facilities maintenance, security, computing, clerical, call centres, mechanical, driving, cleaning, retail, financial & Banking, TV Licensing and manual skills.

The CWU welcomes this consultation on the government proposals for official UK recognition of Workers Memorial Day. This is long standing CWU Annual Conference Policy and something we have been calling upon government and the prime minister to do since 1997.

Background

Decades of struggle by workers and their Unions have resulted in significant improvements in working conditions. But the toll of workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths remains enormous. Each year, 2 million workers die due to unsafe or unhealthy work and workplaces around the globe. Millions more are injured or diseased because of their jobs. The CWU and other Unions across the World unions remember these workers, especially CWU members who have died at work on April 28, International Workers Memorial Day. Trade unionists around the world now join us to mark this day of mourning.

International Workers Memorial Day takes place annually around the world on April 28. It is a day of remembrance for workers killed, injured or made ill by their work and a day on which workers call for safer workplaces and working conditions. The Workers Memorial Day slogan is "Remember the Dead and Fight for the Living".

Following its inception in Canada in 1984, Workers Memorial Day is already recognised as a national day in many countries around the world including Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Luxembourg, Peru, Portugal, Spain, Thailand, Taiwan and the USA.

International Workers Memorial Day was brought to the UK in 1992 by the Hazards Campaign, which has been campaigning for its recognition along with Trade Unions including CWU and other safety campaigning organisations. The CWU first wrote to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997 calling for official recognition.

Since the early 1990s Workers Memorial Day has become the focal point for an increasing number of commemorative events involving the bereaved families of dead workers, trade unionists, the TUC, Trade Unions, Safety Representatives, the Hazards Campaign, FACK, Government bodies and Local Authorities among others.

In 2001, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognised Workers Memorial Day and announced April 28 as an International Day of Action for Safety and Health at Work, which is an annual international campaign to promote safe, healthy and decent work around the globe.

2005 saw the beginning of a process to have the 28 April Day officially adopted by the UN General Assembly.

In 2009, at long last, the current Prime Minister Gordon Brown and DWP Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell conveyed their support to all those people around the world commemorating Workers Memorial Day and announced that the government would look at how the UK could join the many other countries that officially recognise International Workers Memorial Day and confirmed that a consultation will look at how the Day could be officially recognised in the UK.

The Minister said “The fact that some people go out to work and never return home to their families is a human tragedy. Workers Memorial Day is a mark of respect to those killed and injured at work and to the bereaved. We will look at how the UK can officially recognise the day. I know there is a huge amount of support for the Day and there are many ideas for consideration, including a lasting memorial to all those killed and harmed by work activity. Recognising Workers Memorial Day in the UK would also provide an annual focal point for the importance of healthy and safe workplaces.”

The CWU strongly welcomes and commends the Government’s announcement and only regrets that it took the Labour Government 12 years to reach this position.

28 April is also a forward-looking day for action, as well as for mourning. It also draws attention to the fact that workers continue to be exposed at work to risk of injury or death, so calling for action by government, enforcers and employers to improve health and safety at work.

In respect of the specific questions raised in the consultation document the CWU would respond as follows.

1. *Do you agree that the UK should officially recognise Workers Memorial Day?*

Yes

The CWU believes there is a strong case for official recognition of this event. There is insufficient awareness of the appalling death rate that is caused as a result of work activities. Although HSE statistics show that 180 workers were killed while at work last year this is very much an underestimation. It excludes those covered by other regulators such as the CCA and MCA (hence those killed in recent helicopter crashes in the North Sea are omitted), it also omits the 1,000 people who are killed while driving at work on public roads (It is an appalling state of affairs that the HSE do not enforce the law in this area). However, most people who are killed through work do not die immediately. They die as a result of illness or disease, which can manifest itself many years later. Asbestos alone kills over 4,000 people every year. Other workplace cancers are responsible for another estimated 12-16,000 deaths. 4,000 people die as result of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorders brought about through work, and many thousands more are killed through cardiovascular disease caused by stress, over-work, or unhealthy working conditions. It is impossible to put an accurate figure on the number of people whose lives are cut short as a result of their work or working environment, but it is certainly several tens of thousands.

It is important that these deaths are recognised and that there is more awareness of the dangers, both long and short-term, that work can pose. It also is an occasion for the relatives and friends of those who have died to remember their lost ones. By recognising the day official Britain would join the 19 other national Governments who have already recognised the day including Spain, Portugal, Belgium and Greece. The statements made by the Prime Minister in support of Workers Memorial Day in 2009 greatly helped raise awareness of the day.

However, it is important that the event remains one that is organised primarily by the trade union movement alongside those groups who support the victims and families of victims, but supported by Government, rather than an event organised by Government.

2. *Do you agree that official recognition should take effect from 28th April 2010?*

Yes

The CWU believes that official recognition should commence at the earliest opportunity, which would be 28th April 2010.

3. *Do you agree that, with a view to promoting UK-wide involvement in Workers Memorial Day, a different UK region should lead on the commemorations each year?*

No

The CWU believes that it should remain a national event with local and regional events. We would like to see all towns and cities in the UK hold events, such as a vigil, on the day. In addition the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments should be asked to support the day. We believe that were the lead to change from region to region it would make this annual continuity in all regions and nations of the UK less likely to happen. We would therefore not support this proposal.

4. *Do you agree that Government-sponsored websites - such as BusinessLink and Directgov - should promote Workers Memorial Day each year and publicise details of commemorative events?*

Yes

The Day should be promoted through whatever Government websites and publications are appropriate, including the HSE and No. 10 sites.

5. *Do you agree that Government should encourage workplace commemorations of Workers Memorial Day, each year, in manners appropriate to individual workplaces?*

Yes

Workplaces are where the exposure to the hazards that cause death and injury occur. They are therefore the most appropriate place for events to remember those that have died. The CWU believes that the workplace is the most effective place for commemorative events and would encourage either a minutes silence at noon, workplace meetings, or other events on the day.

6. *Do you agree that Government should, where appropriate, encourage commemorations to be held on the nearest Saturday to Workers Memorial Day?*

No

The day is recognised internationally on the 28th April and within the UK that is the date that has traditionally been used for any events. Given that most workplaces are closed on the Saturday, moving it to that day would remove the connection to the workplace. In addition, on occasion, the nearest Saturday to the 28th April would also be May Day which would lead to confusion between the two events. The CWU would wish all events to be held on the actual day.

7. *Do you agree that Government Ministers should be actively involved in commemorating Workers Memorial Day each year?*

Yes

The CWU would welcome the active involvement of Government Ministers on the Day. That could include making supportive speeches, attending commemorative events, visiting workplaces, or announcing initiatives aimed at preventing further deaths. We would hope that Ministers at all levels and departments would be involved by at least wearing the purple “forget-me-not” ribbon that is the symbol of the day.

8. *Have you any other proposals for marking Workers Memorial Day each year?*

Yes

The CWU would like to see flags on public buildings lowered to half mast on the day. This already happens in many municipal buildings. In addition we would wish to see a minutes silence observed in the UK Westminster Parliament and the Scottish Parliament as well as the Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies if they are sitting at noon on that day. It is however important that public and other bodies which support the day do not only use it as an occasion to remember those who died but also take the opportunity to ensure that action is taken to ensure that others do not die as a result of injury or illness caused by work in the future.

End.