

Guardians of workers' bodies? Trade unions and occupational health and safety

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'Guardians of Workers Bodies?' contributes to an ongoing conversation on the role trade unions have played in occupational health and safety. The activities of unions are examined through the lens of experience in Britain focusing on three themes: firstly, the idea within some of the literature that historically unions neglected workers health, especially chronic ill-health and industrial disease; secondly, the challenges to this negative portrayal that supports a rehabilitation of the historic role of unions; and, finally, the recent experience (since c1980) of unions in decline (and under attack) and the impact of this on occupational health and safety standards. It is argued that the role of trade unions needs to be contextualised and that tensions existed within some unions over jobs, wages, and health. Also that we need to know more about working class environmentalism. Nevertheless, there is robust and compelling evidence to support the argument that unions were, and continue to be, a powerful countervailing force operating as the key sentinels protecting workers' bodies in production. And this has been a significant buffer in hard times.

That said, it is also undeniable that capacity to resist and to mediate these wider degenerative forces has been critically neutered now that less than a quarter of the UK workforce are union members and collective bargaining has dissipated. Occupational health standards have worsened in the process, though this manifests itself now (at least in developed economies like the UK) less in physical injury and disability (though these legacies are still visible and continue to blight traditional working class communities), and more in deteriorating psycho-social health with the stress epidemic in the modern workplace. Workers' bodies and minds are again bearing the brunt of a profound economic transformation.



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