

Safety rep

Workers face health hazards from sewage

The RMT rail union has called on train companies to stop their “utterly disgusting” practice of dumping human sewage on rail tracks, causing hazardous working conditions for track workers.

The issue was recently debated in the House of Lords. During the debate, former Conservative minister Baroness Wilcox said: “Before we rush forward to HS2, [the high-speed rail project] which I am looking forward to enormously, I would like to urge you to think about the *men working on the lines* and working in the stations who are having to deal with this excrement.”

For the government, transport minister Lady Kramer replied: “The comments you make totally resonate. This is just utterly disgusting.”

The RMT has been continuing its campaign on



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Track workers face serious health risks from sewage dumping

this scandal after track workers pointed out that some sections of the rail infrastructure are like an open sewer. The sewage often sprays onto passing trains posing a serious health risk for track workers.

Rail works have also been delayed when staff have been faced with pools of raw sewage.

Passengers at London's Liverpool Street station have been signing an e-petition to the government, complaining about the daily sight of excrement on the tracks.

RMT general secretary Bob Crow said: “Raw sewage is still being dumped and sprayed across the tracks up and down the UK. Not only is it a filthy way to dispose of human waste, but it also poses real health risks and dangers for RMT members out there working on the tracks.

“This rotten practice should be stopped once and for all and the train companies should be forced by the government to pay the price for upgrading the trains and employing staff to empty the tanks.”

Government website is 'drivel'

Government websites are “increasingly being used as tools of propaganda rather than being there to give information,” TUC head of health and safety Hugh Robertson said last month.

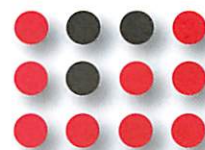
He cited the content of the Department for Work and Pension's safety policy

web pages, saying that it “is clear, concise and simple and is also absolute drivel”.

The website states that “the burden of excessive health and safety rules and regulations on business has become too great”.

Robertson retorted that the claim of excessive rules

and a compensation culture “is, to put it simply, a complete lie”. He added that it was easy to demonstrate the opposite, and that European countries with the strongest levels of protection also have the highest levels of growth.



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Occupational health service to be launched later this year

Will the government's new Health and Work Assessment and Advisory Service improve sickness absence at work? *Safety rep* reports.

The government's new Health and Work Assessment and Advisory Service (HWAAS) is due to go live in autumn 2014 and is expected to provide a full service across the UK by 2015, according to the Department for Work and Pensions. The scheme is expected to cost £40 million.

The proposal for the national service was set out in a government-funded report in November 2011, *Health at work – an independent review of sickness absence* by Dame Carol Black, former national director for health and work and David Frost, former director general of the British Chambers of Commerce.

The report aimed to provide a critical review of the current sickness absence system and an assessment of its performance or failures. It published statistics claiming that every year 140 million working days are lost due to sickness absence. It went on to say that 300,000 people fall out of work into health-related state benefits each year.

One of the reported problems identified in the current system was a lack of access to occupational health, especially for small employers, and one of the recommendations made by *Health at work* was a state-funded occupational health-based independent assessment service.

Last year, the government published a

response to the *Health at work* report, agreeing to implement this proposal. The new HWAAS will be triggered once an employee has been on sick leave for four weeks and will assess the employee's physical and/or mental capacity and provide advice on how that employee can be supported to return to work.

The main characteristics of the service are:

- ◆ to deliver a state-funded assessment by occupational health professionals for employees after four weeks' sick leave;
- ◆ to signpost to appropriate services for further specialist support;
- ◆ to provide employers and employees with advice on overcoming barriers, preventing them from returning to work; and
- ◆ case management for employees with complex needs who require ongoing support to enable their return to work.

Employers will receive tax relief when they spend up to £500 on health treatment recommended by the service to help an employee return to work.

Hugh Robertson, TUC senior policy officer for health and safety, commented: "The TUC has called for early access to rehabilitation. Where employers have ensured that happens then it was clearly wrong that either the worker or the employer should be taxed on this.

"We therefore welcome this change and hope that it applies to all forms of rehabilitation."

The government expects that around 560,000 people will use the service every

year at a cost of between £25 million and £50 million. And it also expects that the service will recommend follow-up interventions and undertake case management at a total cost of between £20 million and £85 million.

Contracts to private healthcare providers to run the HWAAS are due to be awarded in April 2014, with the service beginning to roll out later in the year.

With all this promise, does the HWAAS sound too good to be true?

Closer reading of the *Health at work* report makes a disturbing suggestion for the future. It says that once the service is adopted, employers and possibly employees could be charged for using it. It seems that employees and their families may not get away from paying a price for sickness absence, after all.

When *Health at work* was launched, the Hazards Campaign criticised both the report and the government's response for being based on false notions of a "sick note culture" and a punitive "all work is good for you and if you are sick, work will make you better" approach.

The campaign warned: "The government's response will do nothing at all to prevent workers from becoming ill, or deal with presenteeism, or to ensure that sick workers actually get any early rehabilitation, only offering the insecurity and fear of assessment by a private company whose aim and profit depend on forcing sick workers back to work as quickly as possible."

The campaign said that referral of workers for assessment after four weeks'

sick leave "risks increasing the stress and insecurity of already sick people". It added that the idea that four weeks' off sick is "long term" is ridiculous, as many workers suffering work related stress or musculoskeletal disorders only go off sick when they are absolutely unable to carry on.

In four weeks, "they will barely have had time to recover from the acute phase of their illness, let alone be fit to return to work, or even to face assessment," said Hazards.

A briefing for the NHS Health at Work network of occupational health teams points out: "It is probable that the government will choose to restrict invitations to tender [for the HWAAS] to those providers who have already gone through an approval process and are listed on a preferred bidder framework. Such providers include Atos, Capita and Serco."

Atos has been mired in controversy over its management on behalf of the DWP of the work capability assessments used for people claiming a range of disability benefits.

The company has been dogged by horror stories of sick and disabled people inappropriately found fit for work, and has been criticised for the high level of successful appeals made by claimants.

Meanwhile, last month saw media reports of how Serco had agreed to the early termination of its contract for out-of-hours GP services in Cornwall.

The company was found to be responsible after the county was short of doctors.