

# Creating a union ‘prevent cancer campaign’

Union campaigns have been critical in identifying and addressing occupational cancer risks. But fighting carcinogens one at a time is no substitute for a properly designed and operational cancer prevention strategy.

A successful union ‘prevent cancer campaign’ relies on both national union commitment and resources and participation by active and informed local union reps and members. And it requires vigilance, to ensure promised improvements are effectively implemented.

## First steps for union reps

1. Identify possible cancer risks in the workplaces. This is a job for the union health and safety representatives, safety committee or a union-organised “cancer prevention” committee.
2. Insist substances or processes presenting a cancer risk are where possible removed and substituted with less hazardous substances or safer work methods. Set priorities for action. Union priorities for dealing with risks are in order: elimination; substitution; control; and if nothing else is possible, personal protective equipment such as masks or protective clothing.
3. Ensure workers with work-related cancers are given the support they need and receive any sickness or compensation payments to which they are entitled.
4. Ensure community support by making sure the public knows about air emissions and hazardous waste from the workplace that may be a cancer concern.
5. Don’t act alone – make sure the prevent cancer campaign has the support of workforce and of the union in the workplace and at local and national levels.

## Short-term response

When a work-related cancer risk is suspected in a particular workplace, a short-term investigation by union reps could include:

1. Gathering available evidence, for example death certificates or pension or sickness records, or industrial hygiene, health or media reports. List possible cancer risks in the workplace.
2. Analysis of the information by the local union – is there a suspicion that a workplace or a part of the workplace has more than expected numbers of cancers? Are there exposures in the workplace that could place workers at risk?
3. Where workers have been exposed to a possible cancer risk, it is important they receive regular medical check-ups that could detect cancer in its early stages.
4. Call on the government, safety authorities, the company, universities or supportive workers’

health groups to undertake more comprehensive studies when needed.

**5.** Ensure possible cancer risks are properly assessed – don't accept assurances that exposures are at a "safe" level. And remember official exposure limits are not that the same thing as a safe level.

**6.** Make sure the workplace is made safer - make recommendations for substitution, using less hazardous substances or processes, and for engineering controls.