

Too hot, too cold – Winning temperature protections at work

Extreme temperatures, including cold snaps and heatwaves, are happening more often in Scotland as the climate changes. Unlike many other countries, workers in the UK don't have legal protections from extreme hot and cold temperatures at their work.

To stay safe, you must organise to protect yourself and others in your workplace.

This guide sets out the risks of extreme temperatures, your rights in the workplace, and what you can do to protect yourself and others as reps.


1. How will workers be affected?

The workers most impacted by extreme temperatures will include:

- **Outdoor workers**, such as agriculture, transport, forestry, construction and delivery workers.
- **Workers in hot workplaces** like kitchens or foundries.
- **Workers in indoor environments without air conditioning or cooling**
- **Older workers and those with underlying health conditions**, who will be more clinically vulnerable.

Marginalised workers including migrants, informal labourers, and 'gig economy' workers may be more likely to suffer a lack of income on days when it is too hot or cold to work and may feel higher pressure to work in extreme temperatures.

For all workers, the wrong temperature is a health and safety hazard for you and increases the risks of accidents in the workplace.

If it's too hot, workers risk...	If it's too cold, workers risk...	
Dehydration	Fatigue	
Loss of concentration	Numbness	
Tiredness	Slips and falls	
Dizziness and fainting	Trench foot	
Heat cramps	Back and muscular pain	
Confusion	Chilblains	
Heat stroke	Hypothermia	

2. Getting it right in the workplace

The Workplace (Health, Safety, and Welfare) Regulations say workplace temperatures must be 'reasonable', and the accompanying code of practice says indoor workspaces should be at least 16 °C, or 13 °C for physical work.

A long-running problem for all workers is that although the regulations indicate levels for the lower end of temperatures, they do not do the same for higher temperatures. Even for the lower end temperatures, the regulations and code of practice are not law.

DID YOU KNOW: We have maximum legal temperature levels for transporting livestock, but not for people working. Meanwhile, other countries, including Germany, Spain, and China, have clear health and safety rules setting maximum temperatures.

Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act provides that workers are able to withdraw their labour and refuse to return a workplace without detriment if the circumstances represent a real risk of “serious and imminent danger” you could not be expected to avert. Seek advice from your union if you think you are in this situation.

3. Winning protections in your workplace

Without concrete legal rights for workers at a national level, getting organised to reach an agreement with your employer is key. Every workplace will be different and you as reps and members are best placed to know the protections needed.

There are ways to keep you and other workers safe at your work in extreme temperatures. These can ensure you are protected, temperatures are mitigated, and workers are equipped through negotiating agreements with your employer.

- 1) **Protect:** by negotiating with your employer on maximum and minimum temperature limits at which point it is no longer safe to work. Safe working temperatures will vary according to the kind of work, and where it's done.
 - a. You can use the Workplace Regulations guidance on minimum temperatures
 - b. For maximum temperatures, the Chartered Institute of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) recommends:
 - i. **13°C** for heavy work in factories
 - ii. **16°C** for light work in factories
 - iii. **18°C** in hospital wards and shops
 - iv. **20°C** in offices and dining rooms.
- 2) **Mitigate** by identifying ways temperatures can be better managed in your workplace including
 - a. air conditioning and fans, moving workspaces away from windows and hot areas, insulating hot pipes and equipment and increasing shaded areas and air-cooling plants.
 - b. insulating floor or window coverings, or special footwear when employees have to stand for long periods on cold floors, ensuring there are portable heaters, and reducing draughts.

- 3) **Equip** yourself and others by making sure your employer provides vital PPE and adjusts normal practices during extreme temperatures including
 - a. PPE could include suncream, water coolers, thermal hats and protective layers.
 - b. Adjust working hours to avoid warmer or colder times, ensure more rest breaks and water provision, relax dress codes, and consider those particularly at risk including workers who are older, pregnant, or those with existing medical conditions that could be aggravated.

Organising on this issue is a great way to make a difference in your workplace. The solutions can be simple and will reduce accidents which should appeal to your employer.

You can demonstrate the effectiveness of a union to members while recruiting new members who might be interested in climate change – particularly younger workers. It will build your skills and capacity, while opening doors to other green initiatives.

4) Ready to get started?

- 1) Get union members on board
 - a. Share the information in this guide or survey your members to find out what they think about the issue. Use union meetings and WhatsApp groups to discuss and plan your approach.
- 2) Set your position and build support
 - a. Decide collectively what you think your demand should be of your employer and how to present them. A petition or survey can be an effective way to present collective concerns to management.
- 3) Inform and negotiate with your employer
 - a. Take your concerns and demands to your employer through your usual channels or request a separate meeting on the issue. Establish a commitment to work together to address concerns.

This is a guide for reps to use as part of future-proofing your jobs and your workplace. This is part of a series of guides from the STUC Just Transition Project.

For a more in-depth look at organising in your workplace have a look at our climate bargaining guide with more steps you can take and your rights in the workplace.

You can find all resources on our website and stay up to date with future guides by registering for our newsletter.