

Occupational health and safety guidelines - A shop steward's guide during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present challenges never known before, not only in everyday life but also in the workplace. These challenges require heightened vigilance and effectiveness by shop stewards amidst a looming third wave of infections in South Africa.

COVID-19 is highly infectious and requires mass reorganisation of the workplace to curb the spread of the virus amongst workers. The effectiveness of shop stewards during the crisis is anchored on how well they know the various occupational health and safety (OHS) guidelines and directions.

The OHS directions released by the Minister of Employment and Labour provide the basic standards in the workplace to prevent the spread of the virus. The directions detail the obligations of employers, including undertaking a risk assessment and developing a plan, outlining the protective measures in place for the phased return of employees.

The OHS plans must include:

- A list of workers permitted to return to work and those who are required to work from home
- The plan and timetable for the phased return of workers to the workplace
- Workplace protective measures required to be taken in addition to the OHS directions in terms of sector guidelines

An employer is required to arrange the workplace in a manner to ensure that workers can adhere to social distancing. The workplace must be sanitised and decontaminated regularly, and each worker must have access to sanitisers or facilities to regularly wash hands, as well as the provision of the necessary personal protective equipment.

If an employee was possibly exposed and it is believed that there is a low risk of infection, the employer may permit the employee to continue working, whilst observing all safety protocols and monitoring symptoms. If there is a high risk of exposure, an employee must remain in quarantine between seven and 14 days. The employer must place the employee on paid sick leave and if the employee remains asymptomatic, no further testing is required before returning to work.

Compliance with OHS directives is imperative. The lack of compliance in some cases has necessitated a new section in OHS directions that allows employees to refuse to work owing to COVID-19 exposure. If an employee has reasons to believe that the workplace presents a risk of such exposure, the employee must notify the employer and the health and safety representative. If the employer and the safety committee cannot resolve the threat to exposure internally, a Labour Inspector must be notified. The employer is compelled to comply with any prohibition notice issued by the Inspector in terms of section 30 of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*.

This is a critical time for adherence to the OHS by employers and employees. As much as shop stewards have the best interest of employees at heart, they must ensure that they also rigidly adhere to OHS requirements.

Source

<https://www.lrs.org.za/2021/02/01/how-to-become-an-effective-shop-steward-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

