

WORKERS MEMORIAL DAY

Sunday 28th April 2013

Speech: Steve Attwill, Regional Officer Unite the Union

We meet here today as the dramatic events following the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh continues to unfold, and show's that there is still a desperate need for such a day as today. With 352 know dead, some 900 workers still remain unaccounted, widespread non-compliance with adequate building regulations and overcrowding of workers desperate for work appear to be the cause

In Texas residents have only just returned to their homes following a deadly blast at a local fertilizer plant last week. The blast flattened large sections of this small town of 2,700 people, killing 14 and injuring 200, the majority being emergency personnel. The blast was so powerful it registered as a magnitude 2.1 earthquake. First indications are that the factory was in blatant breach of safety laws by storing 1,350 times the amount of ammonium nitrate that would normally spark federal government inspections.

These recent examples are the tip of an ice-burg according to ILO estimate. There are 2.34 million occupational fatalities every year, of which 321,000 are due to accidents. The remaining 2.02 million deaths are caused by various types of work-related diseases, that's a daily average of more than 5,500 deaths. This means that far more people die through work than die in wars every year.

Yet this is not an issue just for countries like Bangladesh and China, it is still very much an issue here. Let's not forget that, by the very lowest estimates, over 20,000 people die prematurely in the UK every year because of their work – and the true figure is likely to be much higher.

Workers' Memorial Day remembers those workers. The day is also intended to serve as a rallying cry: "Remember the dead, but fight for the living"

"There is no more basic human right than to go to work in the morning and return home again at the end of the day safely, but for a significant number of workers, work itself is a hazard to their health and well-being.

The last published UK figures show:

- 171 workers killed at work
- 800 workers are killed on the roads while working
- 4000 workers died from lung disease
- 8000 workers die of cancers that are caused by their work
- 118,000 workers had work related injuries reported under RIDDOR
- 1.2 million Workers' suffering from a work-related illness.
- 26.4 million working days lost due to work-related illness and injury

As a result, the UK comes 20th out of the 34 OECD countries when judged on its Health & Safety record. The TUC believes all these deaths, injuries and illnesses could have been avoided if employers took the proper precautions.

But despite this human cost, government is obsessed with removing regulations “as burdens” rather than trying to ensure the regulation is effective. Over the last 10 years there has been a big fall in the number of inspections, and even then there were not enough. In March last year the government instructed the HSE not to make any more proactive inspections along with local authorities. On Thursday this week, Employment Minister Mark Hoban sneaked in plan for a further “root and branch” review of the HSE to assess whether it remains “necessary”.

But the number of people killed through work is only a part of the picture.

The HSE estimates that there were around half a million new cases of illness caused by work last year . . . and while many of these illnesses will go away quickly, many others become long-term and can remain with the worker for the rest of their life, costing society an estimated £14 billion of which the individual worker suffers 60% of burden with both government and companies meeting 20% each.

One of the principles behind Britain’s health and safety laws is the belief that the involvement of the workforce is crucial to achieving good standards of health and safety, and that systems work best when trade unions and employers work together.

At the core of this are health and safety reps. these unpaid volunteers make a massive contribution in the workplace. There are around 150,000 health and safety reps appointed and supported by trade unions in the UK

The TUC report, “*The Union Effect*” outlined the benefits of trade union organisation and health and safety representatives. In 1995, 23 years after “The Health & Safety at Work Act”, researcher found that employers who had trade union safety arrangements had half the injury rate of those employers who managed safety without unions.

Several other studies in 2004 and 2007 similarly concluded lower injury rates in workplaces with trade union representation, with the effects deemed to be significant. By contrast the effect of management alone deciding on health and safety was not significant.

Yet their work seems to go unnoticed and unrewarded by many employers’ and by the government who seem increasingly hostile to their effectiveness. In fact a number of proposed changes including cutting down their facility time to undertake inspections and investigations in work will either make it more difficult for safety representatives to do their job, or give them an even larger burden in the workplace.

But behind all the figures and statistics is a personal tragedy, a story of continuing pain and suffering, a worker or a family robbed of a quality of life that many of us take for granted every-day.

So it is for them and for us, that we are here today, and repeat this pledge on Workers’ Memorial Day, “Remember the dead, but fight for the living.”

Sources:

HSE Guide to H&S Statistics 2011

TUC Defend Union Safety Representatives 2011 (Bulletin Five)

TUC Defend H&S Enforcement 2011 (Bulletin Two)

TUC Report – “The Union Effect”

Health & Safety at Work Act – 1972

Hugh Robertson is the Senior Policy Officer for Health and Safety at the TUC.

Guardian on-line 27-4-2013

Morning Star 27-4-2013