

Editor's comment

THROWING SAFETY TO THE WIND?

THE boss of the construction union UCATT and the directors of the major contractors don't often get heated up about the same issues and, even more uncommonly, end up on the same side. This has happened following a Conservative Party recommendation to allow builders to stop Health & Safety Executive (HSE) inspectors from making unannounced visits to their sites if they hold their own 'independent' safety audits.

This blatant attempt by the Tories to weaken the authority of the HSE if they win the election has deeply angered the general secretary of UCATT, Alan Ritchie, who is always good for a punchy quote. He describes the proposal as 'the politics of the madhouse' and 'playing with people's lives'.

Mr Ritchie's rant is echoed, albeit in more measured terms, by Shaun Davis, a director of main contractor Rok, who says the system put forward by the Tories could be wide open to abuse. He adds: 'Anything that could lead to a watering-down of safety standards is very dangerous.'

Peter Harrison Fisher, a director of the construction giant, Costain, believes that the Conservative move could force businesses to employ extra health & safety staff, driving up their payrolls by thousands of pounds.

Significantly, the Tory idea has also been condemned by the British Safety Council. Neal Stone of the BSA calls it 'a backward step for effective regulation.'

And once in government, the Conservatives' likely next step could be to further emasculate the HSE by slashing its funding, reducing the number of safety inspectors it can employ, a move already started by the current government.

Building sites are known to be the most hazardous work places with many hundreds of serious accidents annually. The squeeze on margins during the recession has caused many firms to cut corners, especially in health & safety. So the dangers are greater, threatening more crippling injuries to construction workers and a rising death toll.

Despite this dire situation the Conservatives want to curb the powers of HSE inspectors to stage surprise site visits, which regularly expose a multitude of major health & safety breaches. Indeed, many infringements of the regulations are so significant that the inspectors close down the sites until the problems are rectified.

One incentive for managers to focus on health & safety are the strict penalties in the Corporate Manslaughter Act 2007 (heavy fines and even prison sentences). It allows for companies and organisations to be prosecuted for serious management failures – 'gross breach of the duty of care' – causing death or injury to employees.

The question now must be whether this landmark Act, introduced by Labour, has any future if a Tory government decides to leave builders to police themselves.



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For starters:
What keeps you awake?

Builders are the most sleep-deprived workers in the UK, averaging just over six hours of shut-eye a night, according to a new survey. Sponsored by Travelodge, the study discovers that 83% of British workers get less than the prescribed eight hours of sleep each night of the working week.

It finds that the economic climate keeps many

awake as they fret about their jobs and financial security. But having sleepless nights over a long term is known to be detrimental to your health, while also reducing your productivity at work.

The survey also reveals those in jobs who get the most sleep. Top of the list is salesmen! Maybe their sales targets are too low! Bosses: Take note!



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