



AUSTERITY FEARS AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF UK WORKERS, SAYS TUC SURVEY

The harsh economic climate, austerity-related job cuts and job loss fears amongst those still in work is having a real impact on the health and well-being of workers, according to a TUC safety survey published recently.

The top safety concerns cited this year by union safety reps in the TUC's tenth biennial survey this year were stress, bullying and harassment, problems relating to heavy workloads and overwork, and violence and intimidation.

The TUC believes that many of these growing concerns are down to the increasing fears of insecurity and unease being felt throughout the UK workforce as spending cuts and austerity economics hit hard.

Safety reps in the TUC survey also raised concerns about a decline in the number of safety inspections. The TUC fears this situation will only get worse as cuts to the budgets of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and local authorities mean that in future there will be fewer HSE and council safety inspectors to check up on employers.

Just under half (45 per cent) of the 1,875 safety reps who responded to the TUC survey earlier this year said that their workplace had never had a visit from a safety inspector. One in ten of the safety reps (ten per cent) hadn't seen a safety inspector in their workplace for more than three years, and another 16 per cent said their workplace hadn't been inspected for between one and three years.

Just 28 per cent of union safety reps reported a visit from a safety inspector in the past year and even in sectors like construction, well-known for its poor safety records, less than half (41 per cent) said their building sites had received a safety inspection in the last 12 months.

Worryingly, because employers are becoming aware that a visit from a safety inspector might be years away, safety reps said that their employers were now less likely to make safety improvements for fear of a possible inspection. Two years ago, 61 per cent of safety reps said their employer had made some attempt at safety improvements because of the possibility of an inspection. In 2012 this had declined to 53 per cent.

Commenting on the survey, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: 'Fears about how austerity is affecting peoples' jobs and their families is having a real impact on the health and well-being of UK workers.'

'As jobs are cut, so the workload of those left behind increases. As the workload rise so do the stress levels of over-worked employees, which lead to a greater risk of bullying and harassment as stressed-out supervisors take out their frustrations on staff.'

'Government spending cuts are also having a big effect on the likelihood of workplaces receiving visits from HSE or council safety inspectors. A growing number of employers now seem content to let safety standards slip, so confident are they that an inspector is unlikely to call and hold their workplace safety policies to account.'

'Meanwhile the message coming from government is that much of health and safety regulation is needless red tape. But last year 173 workers died at work and thousands more were made ill by their jobs because their employers didn't place a high enough premium on their safety. Unions campaigning to improve workplace safety are clearly going to have their work cut out in the coming year.'