

Rebuild Britain without austerity says **Doug Nicholls**, General Secretary of General Federation of Trade Unions

We should not for one second allow the new talk of economic meltdown and belt-tightening to gain ground - it's human welfare that should be our priority, says GFTU general secretary **Doug Nicholls**.

The law is the strongest piece of legislation we have in that it gives workers power in the workplace to withdraw if the environment is unsafe. It was the product of over 170 years of science, campaigning and bitter struggle and tragic circumstances. It wasn't uncommon for workers to lie dead in the factory as the relentless grind of production whirred around them.

However, like all legislation, it requires organisation in the workplace to apply it. Only two years after it was passed, workers at Babcock and Wilcox were sacked for refusing to work with asbestos without protective clothing. They eventually won their case after six months of strike action.

Nevertheless, some historians have accounted for a staggering 84 per cent fewer fatalities at work than prior to the Act coming in. Yet still the figures are too high: 187 workers lost their lives in workplace accidents in Britain last year. Its enforcement was hampered by years of cuts to the Health and Safety Executive. The Health and Safety at Work Act is a social piece of legislation that puts a shared duty of care on employers, employees and the public. An understanding of its provisions have long formed the popular bedrock of most trade union education. Its significance is now very great indeed. At this time the provisions in our health and safety legislation for risk assessments and for the duty of care are critical and right in the foreground in every workplace. Many unions are intensifying their online learning offers to ensure that all workplaces and branches are fully conversant with the legislation.

The General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) too is offering a new online service called Emplaw, with an accompanying monthly newsletter and huge resource of model policies and procedures and case studies to support unions and employers to get the best understanding of rights and responsibilities and best practice.

At our recent executive meeting the unsung daily effectiveness of unions in protecting lives was hearteningly conveyed. Hospital consultants have a major negotiation on their hands for appropriate provision of PPE, realistic hours of work and support in dealing with so many bereavements of patients without their families present. Pharmacists have had a range of complex protective issues to deal with in community pharmacies and the NHS. Social workers, educational psychologists, probation and prison officers have faced an array of new dangers.

Unsurprisingly the new conditions that are generating more mental health issues are also creating a changed environment, challenging the greatly needed services of those who can help most, like psychotherapists and counsellors. We heard from many sectors of tragic fatalities of workers in the line of duty seeking to cure and protect others.

It was a very moving discussion and the scale of the sacrifice that the nation now recognises that so many groups of workers are making only deepened the anger directed towards those in the government, like the Chancellor, who are planning to make today's heroes tomorrow's victims in a new round of austerity.

As well as understanding and enforcing health and safety legislation, there is a need to return to proper economic understanding. They are already massaging language and media to talk of "recession," "slump," "depression." There is, they say, a need for more taxes and public-sector pay freezes and public sector cuts.

This is dangerous talk. It shows no duty of care to the nation and it will cost lives. We know the number of those already killed by austerity. It is only capitalist production that slumps - people supporting each other do not. The risks the nation faces if another round of government cuts comes are totally unacceptable and unnecessary.

As historian Adam Tooze recently quite rightly wrote about national debt, "We merely owe government debts to ourselves." We should be cancelling existing debts and investing in an intense period of economic growth to regenerate the wealth that will have been lost. No stock exchange trader, money lender or banker can generate this wealth.

Our parents rebuilt Britain after the second world war when the national debt was five times bigger than it is now. We should not for one second allow the new talk of economic meltdown and belt-tightening to gain ground. We have a duty of care to everyone in a new and obvious way. You cannot put a price on this.

SWU is an active member of the General Federation of Trade Unions and our General Secretary sits on the National Executive. The GFTU is a friendly democratic organisation responsive to the needs of affiliated Specialist Trade Unions and represents 290,000 Trade Union members.