

Liam Reid

Speaking to move a motion proposed by Dundee Labour Party to the 2013 Scottish Labour Party conference in Inverness

Motion :

Health and Safety at Work

Conference notes that work related stress and other work attributed mental health problems are now the major cause of sick absence from work.

Conference also notes that a recently launched study by Professor Phil Taylor from Strathclyde University, entitled 'Performance Management and the New Workplace Tyranny', has linked the rise in work related mental health problems to Human Resource Management Policies such as Performance Management and Sick Absence Management.

Conference is very concerned that work related mental health problems are dramatically increasing and the pressure exerted on staff by HR Management such as Performance Management are a major cause.

Conference agrees that there is now a need to protect workers mental health in the same way the Labour Party, when in government, enacted legislation to stop employers damaging workers physical health. The Scottish Labour Party therefore commits to seeking the amendment of existing Health and Safety legislation or campaign to introduce new legislation that will stop employers damaging workers mental health.

Liam's speech :

Thank you Conference.

Conference, the Dundee Labour Party believes that existing Health and Safety legislation does not do enough to protect the mental health of employees suffering from ever more complex and ever more stressful performance and absence management techniques.

As conference will know, the stated aim of the use of 'Performance Management' by companies is to continuously improve employee performance.

Despite claims that this is a collaborative procedure designed to allow employers and employees to work together harmoniously, our trade union colleagues tell us that this process instead tends to focus on the setting of ever harder to reach targets and an attempt to reduce absence levels through punishment rather than support.

Evidence shows that such practices result in increased levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

Our colleagues in a number of trade unions have grown concerned regarding this treatment of their members to the point that the STUC commissioned a study on the topic.

This study - carried out by Professor Phil Taylor of the University of Strathclyde - entitled 'Performance Management and the New Workplace Tyranny' examines in detail the impact that such management techniques can have on employees mental health.

Continual scrutiny at work and the ever increasing and visible mistrust of those who are absent forces people to return to work while still unwell or even, in many cases, to avoid taking time off in the first place.

When discussing the impact of such absence management procedures in relation to an employees mental health, Professor Taylor states that;

“ ...it should be noted that insofar as these tighter sickness absence management policies and practices can be regarded as an element of performance management, they have been seen by employees in these studies to contribute to ill-health... “

Conference, any absence management procedure that makes the problem worse and the employee more ill, is not only poor business, counter-productive and therefore illogical, it has no place in a caring society.

In order to meet performance targets employees of many companies are subjected to routine analysis of all their actions within the workplace.

While we wouldn't expect companies to not consider what their employees do with their working day, a process that can include critique of how long a person spends in the bathroom has surely gone too far?

Professor Taylor talks extensively in his report about the impact that performance and absence management techniques have on the well being of employees.

He specifically and clearly writes about the process as a whole.

From the ever more rigid - and regular performance appraisals to the intensification of work, our Human Resource Departments are very much the problem and their techniques have little impact beyond increasing the day to day pressures on employees and setting them on the road to those mental health difficulties mentioned earlier.

As conference will agree, there is no doubt that instances of mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression are on the rise across both the public and private sectors.

In 2011 both the Department for Work and Pensions and the CBI released reports stating that mental health conditions were the biggest cause of long term absence amongst the workforce and the Department for Work and Pensions advised organisations to develop their management techniques to better respond to this problem. It is therefore disappointing to note that companies appear to be going in the opposite direction and increasing the pressure and strain on their employees.

These worrying trends cause even more concern when we consider the disproportionately high impact that these procedures have on women and the disabled.

Those with disabilities that still allow the sufferer to work but that can cause regular absence from work while receiving some support via measures included in the Disabilities Discrimination act are still subjected to absence procedures designed to pressure them into the workplace rather than worry about their health.

This causes additional stress and upset to staff members who may already be vulnerable.

In the case of many women employees absence and performance management has a greater impact than it does on their male counterparts.

A substantial body of evidence exists that shows that women are still predominantly responsible for the role of carer in our society, be that for children, elderly relatives or family members with illnesses or disabilities.

Dealing with issues that arise from these responsibilities inevitably leads to an impact on work- sudden school closures due to bad weather will result in lateness, an elderly person having a bad fall can lead to a day spent in hospital and restless nights and long days helping to care for someone with a physical or mental disability will naturally impact on concentration and in turn productivity.

The impact of adding stress at work via performance and absence management to these issues has far reaching consequences, by adding stress to an already stressful situation mental illness is likely to follow.

Conference, our colleagues in the trade unions have tried working with Line Managers and Human Resources departments since these procedures were first implemented in the 1990s but to no avail.

The Dundee Labour Party asks that we campaign to amend existing Health and Safety legislation to protect workers' mental health from the procedures discussed and, if we cannot do so, seek to amend those when we are next in power.

Conference, support the motion.

View Liam's speech online :

<http://www.dundeelabour.org.uk/liamreid21042013.htm>

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