Why would anyone want to make the workplace more dangerous?

‘If a builder constructs a house for a man but does not make his work strong, with the result that this house collapses, and so causes the death of the owner, the builder shall be put to death.’ That was Hamorabi, Emperor of Babylon, in 1750BC. ‘Health and safety’ has come in for a bit of a battering in some quarters but, at its heart, health and safety is about preventing injuries and saving people’s lives.

In Safe at Work (Spokesman Books, £15) Dave Putson, health and safety representative for the public services union PCS in the London Courts, traces the history of legislation in Britain since 1700 when there were no safety provisions or Acts of Parliament in place. As Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS, says in his introduction, this book could hardly be more timely. ‘It is a history of the struggles for rights; the right to form a trade union; the right to vote; the right for dignity in the workplace and fair pay; the right for education, welfare and health care. All fought for in the face of fierce resistance from those who felt their profits might be affected or their political power constrained.

Today, many bosses want to reverse these hard-won gains. ‘Our Prime Minister echoes the worst of the 19th century’s irresponsible industrialists when he says health and safety is an “albatross round the neck of British businesses” and he wants to “kill off the health and safety culture for good”.

‘Workers only got these rights and protections because they organised and fought for them. It is a depressing but familiar tale of history that, today, we need to fight those same battles again.’

Union calls for protection for train drivers

ASLEF general secretary Mick Whelan has called for greater protection for train drivers from vandals and trespassers on the railways as two more trains were attacked. ‘This is becoming an everyday occurrence,’ says Mick. ‘Our members have the right to go about their occupation without worrying about their safety – and if the driver is under attack, so too are the passengers.’

Sooner or later, he says, these attacks will lead to a major incident. That’s why he is calling for better education in schools, on stations and in communities to warn potential vandals of the seriousness of this dangerous anti-social behaviour.

The chair of the union’s Motherwell branch was injured when a stone was thrown through his window as he drove between Blantyre and Newton stations just after 10pm, and a Preston to London Virgin Pendolino train was delayed for three hours at Crewe after it was attacked by youths who caused £6,000 worth of damage.

‘Tossing objects at trains is not a bit of fun,’ says Mick. ‘It is dangerous vandalism that could lead to a loss of life!’ Mick called for a continual process of education, rather than just ‘an outbreak of activity’ after an incident.

Ton up to raise money

Dean Anderson, a driver at Caterham depot, is riding in the London road race on Sunday 4 August – a 100 mile course following the Olympic route – to raise funds for St Catherine’s Hospice in Crawley.

‘I lost my father-in-law on 25 December,’ explains Dean. ‘He died of heart failure at the age of 67. In the last seven weeks of his life he was cared for by St Catherine’s; I cannot tell you what a difference this made to my family at an extremely difficult time.

‘The hospice is funded, almost all, by charitable donations. It would mean so much to me and my family if you could sponsor me, pennies or pounds, anything to help this wonderful cause.’ You can sponsor Dean by visiting www.justgiving.com/Dean-Anderson

TRIUMPH IN SARUM

ASLEF’s Tom Corbin was elected as a Labour Party candidate for Salisbury, where he has lived and worked for 35 years. His wife Caroline Corbin was elected, too, and with another Labour candidate, Michael Osment, also elected, it meant Labour took all three seats from Bemerton ward on the city council, beating the Conservative, UKIP and Green candidates.

LEVEL CROSSINGS: THE DEATH TOLL RISES

Nine people have been killed on level crossings in the past year and 453 drivers and pedestrians barely escaped with their lives in what Network Rail describes as ‘near misses’. Trains smashed into 10 vehicles and 33 vehicles hit and damaged barriers. Critics say level crossings are a ‘19th century solution in an era of high-speed rail’ and want traffic to be re-routed over or under the railway tracks. The cost would be ‘a small price to pay for public and staff safety’.

American court to grant him permission to stay in Cuba

Rene Gonzalez home at last

After more than 14 years in a US jail and on supervised release in Florida, Rene Gonzalez, the Cuban anti-terrorist fighter, is home at last with his family following the decision of an American court to grant him permission to stay in Cuba.

René was in the country for two weeks humanitarian leave to attend the memorial service for his recently deceased father. The court granted him permission to stay on condition that he renounce his US citizenship.

Although this is a cause for celebration for René, his family and all those who have campaigned for the freedom of the Cuban Five, his four compatriots – Ramón Labarínho, Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero and Fernando González – are still in prison in the United States – and campaigners say the fight for their freedom continues until they, too, are back home with their families.