

The Price of Austerity



GMB Congress in Brighton will soon be upon us (June 9th – 13th) and this year it will be a very special one for two reasons. Firstly, we are celebrating the 130th birthday of the formation of the GMB and secondly this will be my first as chair after being elected as President at Congress 2018.

And I'm sure it won't come as a surprise if I say that I am a little nervous!

Our annual Congress is the supreme decision making body of our union, it is where GMB policy is debated and set by members. As such, it is the democracy of the union in action. Many months of planning have gone into organising it. However Congress is also much more than this. It is also where new friendships are formed and old ones are re-united, where GMB reps share best practice, support and help each other and rejuvenate their batteries, ready to go back to their branches and workplaces to defend and improve terms and conditions for our members. There is something very special about GMB Congress and if you have never been before, then I would urge you to think about putting yourself



forward as a delegate to next year's in Blackpool, or come as a visitor and see what it is all about for yourself. Of course, you can always watch it on the GMB website.

Having been a visitor to a couple of Congresses, my first ever one as a delegate was in 2010 in the Southport Floral Hall & Convention Centre. I gave three speeches and made the mistake of not timing them beforehand, so overran, got the red light and several polite requests from President Mary Turner to wind up. I can remember feeling like a rabbit caught in the head lights, determined to get through my speech. My one piece of advice to new delegates is practice your speech and make sure you are within the time limits given. You will feel more relaxed when you are delivering your speech, knowing that you won't be seeing the red light.



p>Mental health is always one of the topics debated at Congress, whether that be mental health of our members, young people or our own GMB reps. Mental health is an issue that is close to my heart, especially since my eldest son took his own life in 2015 at the age of 25.

Next week, Monday 13th May to Sunday 19th May is Mental Health Awareness Week, organised by the Mental Health Foundation. All kinds of topics have been highlighted since the first Awareness Week in 2001, such as stress, relationships, loneliness, altruism, sleep, alcohol and friendship. This year it is "Body Image – how we think and feel about our bodies."

This Conservative Government has made much of increasing their support for mental health, but their austerity programme has simultaneously seen cuts in NHS mental health services, thereby increasing waiting times to get help. When elected Prime Minister, Theresa May pledged new initiatives to end "stigma" around mental health. I do believe that campaigns like Time to Talk have helped to erode the stigma around mental health, but encouraging people to talk about their mental health if there is not the funding commitment to provide support for those who need help is just hypocrisy on the part of this government.



There is much evidence to show that children who live in poverty are exposed to a range of risks that can have a serious impact on their mental health. It's not difficult to see how poverty is a major cause of stress. If you can't pay bills, buy food, cover the rent, afford to provide for your children, are worried that you may be made redundant or that your benefits are going to be cut, then of course you are going to be stressed.

We need not only to have properly funded NHS services but an end to the austerity measures that have been imposed on us for so long and created huge wealth inequality, if we are to really tackle the crisis in mental health.

I know that at Congress in a few weeks' time we will be hearing many impassioned speeches calling for exactly that.

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