



One Death is One Too Many

April 28th is a solemn day for workers, as we gather to remember workers who have died through workplace incidents or occupational disease. We recognize and are saddened by the pain and suffering felt by families and loved ones.

The numbers are alarming. In Newfoundland and Labrador 13 work-related fatalities were officially recorded in 2016, eight of which were due to occupational illness. Approximately 1,000 workers are killed in Canada every year. Thousands more are seriously injured. Many are young workers. Tens of thousands are forced to live with a debilitating injury or illness, all because of their employment.

This Day of Mourning is especially important. On the morning of May 9th, 1992, one of the deadliest mining disasters in Canadian history occurred. An explosion at the Westray Mine in Pictou County, NS killed all 26 miners working underground.

In the public inquiry that followed, it became clear that corporate neglect and incompetence played a major role in this disaster. Despite years of police investigation, no one was ultimately held responsible for these 26 deaths.

The United Steelworkers lobbied and won changes to the Criminal Code. The Westray Law made it possible to prosecute corporate criminal negligence. Criminal negligence resulting in a worker's death, is a crime – not an accident.

Decades later, many workplace fatalities are still not properly investigated. Only a handful of workplace deaths have resulted in criminal charges, despite thousands of workplace deaths and serious injuries every year.

In honour of the 26 miners who lost their lives, we call on the federal government to take all necessary steps to ensure full enforcement of the Westray Law.

We are demanding leadership from all levels of government. Crown prosecutors and police need to be trained and directed in the Westray provisions of the Criminal Code. Health and Safety inspectors should be trained to view every workplace with a fatality as a potential crime scene.

In 1992, the Government of NL officially recognized the National Day of Mourning thanks to Jack Harris, former leader of the NL NDP. Initiated in 1984 by the Canadian Labour Congress, the Day of Mourning is observed in over 80 countries.



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This year is also important for workplace health and safety, when it comes to asbestos. After years of campaigning and lobbying, last December, the federal government announced a ban on the manufacture, import, export and use of asbestos-containing products, such as building materials and brake pads. Canadian imports of asbestos grew from \$4.7 million in 2011 to \$8.3 million in 2015.

More than 2,000 Canadians die every year from diseases caused by asbestos exposure, such as mesothelioma and lung cancer. Experts estimate 150,000 Canadians are exposed to asbestos at work, in industries like construction, automobile maintenance and waste management. Many First Nations houses have been filled with asbestos-ridden, vermiculate insulation.

The asbestos ban is long overdue. In 1987, the World Health Organization declared asbestos a carcinogen. Today over 50 countries have banned asbestos. This decision is too late for people who have lost family members to asbestos-related illnesses.

It is critically important that the provincial government and Workplace NL, do all it can to support and properly compensate those Baie Verte miners and families who continue to suffer and die, as a result of exposure to asbestos. It is estimated that between 2,400 and 2,800 people worked at the Baie Verte asbestos mine site. Research found workers were exposed to excessive amounts of asbestos.

Also concerning, is a recent news release on silica dust impacting workers at the IOC mine in Labrador City. Of the 636 people studied, 86 were found to have abnormalities on their lungs and 35 were suspected cases of silicosis. The United Steelworkers are alarmed at these findings and are demanding that the company take immediate action to improve the air quality around the mill site.

It is the responsibility of employers to ensure that workplaces are safe from all hazards, including those that can lead to occupational illnesses such as asbestosis, silicosis, and crab asthma. In the 21st Century, surely it isn't too much to demand that workers go to work each day and come home safely. One death is one too many.

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