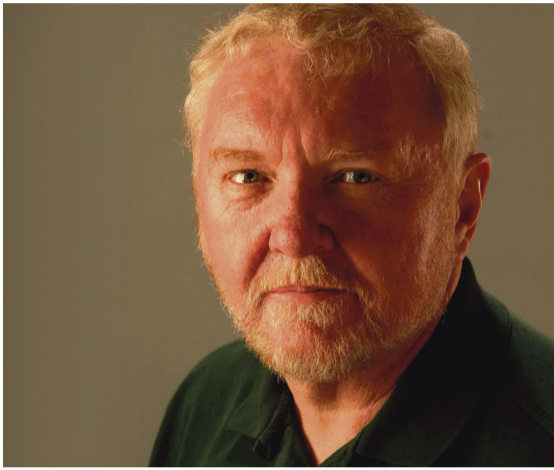


Workplace Fatalities Should be **Unacceptable** in Modern Society



BY DON MACKINNON
President
Power Workers' Union

Every year the Workplace Safety Insurance Board (WSIB) releases statistics regarding workplace fatalities and accident claims from the previous year. Unfortunately, the statistics are not providing a record of progress. Why is it that every year in Ontario, between 200 and 300 workers lose their lives as a result of traumatic workplace accidents and occupational illnesses? According to the latest report, in 2015, 229,000 accident claims were filed with the Ontario WSIB. That is up almost 15 percent from the year before.

All of those killed and injured were ordinary people working to make a living – mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. Every one of those accidents and exposures to hazardous substances was preventable.

With the passage of Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act (the Act)* in 1979, workplace fatalities dropped significantly over the following years. Unfortunately, since this initial decrease, the number of workers killed in the province's workplaces has not declined significantly.

On April 28th, the "National Day of Mourning", we remember those who lost their lives as a result of work-related accidents or occupational diseases. Actions taken in the mid-1980s by the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Canadian Labour Congress were instrumental in establishing this day of remembrance. This date was chosen because Canada's first comprehensive Workers' Compensation Act received Third Reading in Ontario on that day in 1914. The Day of Mourning is now recognized in one fashion or another in more than 100 countries.

Regardless of the industry, there are hazards present in all workplaces. Work

needs to be carefully planned with a focus on safety and workers must be well-trained to implement the plan. All hazards must be identified, eliminated or controlled. Anything else will result in accidents, injuries and fatalities. Special attention needs to be placed on ensuring that new workers are supervised effectively and given adequate knowledge and understanding of workplace hazards and safe work procedures so they come home safe and sound at the end of their workday.

In Ontario, our workplace health and safety system relies on the co-operation of employers and workers through the appointment of Health and Safety Representatives and the establishment of Joint Health and Safety Committees that are required to inspect, identify and address health and safety issues in the workplace. It should be no surprise that the safest workplaces are those where employer and worker representatives genuinely work together to create an accident-free environment. When the parties can't agree, the Ministry of Labour can be called to assist or intervene.

Since the initial electrification of homes and businesses in our province, the Power Workers' Union has continuously worked to set and improve the safety standards for both the general public and for workers in the electricity sector.

Traditionally, electricity flowed from large generating stations along a network of transmission and distribution wires to our homes, businesses and factories. Now, in addition to that traditional movement of electricity, reliability must be maintained while managing a two-way flow of power that can change rapidly. Consumer-owned generators produce intermittent power to sell to the grid at one price, while buying the electricity they use from the grid at another. A customer can become a generator at any time and many can be both customer and generator simultaneously. It is a constant challenge in our industry, and many others, to ensure that safe work methods keep up with rapidly changing technologies.

Power Workers work in a wide variety of locations and weather conditions across Ontario. Extreme weather often creates hazardous situations, such as those seen during the ice storms of January 1998 and December 2013, that are

among the most potentially dangerous anywhere. Dedication to the development, renewal and implementation of safe work procedures, planning, training and experience are all essential to insulate workers from potential hazards.

The single most important legal right that a worker has to protect himself or herself in Ontario workplaces is the right to refuse to work in situations where the worker has reason to believe that they have not been adequately trained to perform a particular task safely or that the work plan, the equipment, the physical condition of the workplace, or the threat of workplace violence is likely to endanger them. In the event that a health and safety related work refusal is not resolved immediately

Ensuring workplace safety requires constant vigilance on the part of employers, unions, workers, Ministry of Labour officials and legislators all working together.

to the satisfaction of the worker, the Ministry of Labour is called to investigate and prescribe remedies to ensure that workers are safe. Workers are protected from retaliation by their employer in these instances under the Act.

Still, this year in Ontario, thousands of workers will be injured and hundreds more will die from workplace accidents and industrial illnesses. All of these accidents are needless, preventable and unacceptable. Ensuring workplace safety requires constant vigilance on the part of employers, unions, workers, Ministry of Labour officials and legislators all working together.

Regrettably, we still have a long way to go to eliminate workplace deaths and injuries but we know we can get there. At Day of Mourning ceremonies, we renew our commitment to achieve those goals. We mourn for the dead and fight for the living.

FROM THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO KEEP THE LIGHTS ON.

