

One death at work is one death too many

The annual Day of Mourning is an opportunity to remember those whose lives were lost and to renew our resolve to make workplaces safer

BY DOUG ALLEY, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 26, 2010



An iron worker guides a girder into place on top of the new Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre. Last year 121 people in B.C. died from work-related injuries or illnesses.

Photograph by: Mark Van Manen, Vancouver Sun Files, Special to the Sun

Wednesday, April 28, is the annual Day of Mourning. It is the day we remember those who have lost their lives through work-related accidents or occupational diseases. The ceremony is sponsored by Work-SafeBC, the Business Council of B.C. and the B.C. Federation of Labour.

The Day of Mourning is an important day for all British Columbians. It is the day we remember individuals who should have gone home at the end of their workday. It is also a day we reflect on what we can do to prevent injury, illness and death from occurring in the workplace.

Each April 28 we gather to hear the statistics. In 2009, 121 workers lost their lives -61 through work-related accidents and 60 through occupational diseases. This is 121 too many.

We in the employer community believe that any life lost is unnecessary. Through the Employers' Forum, an organization that represents a broad spectrum of employers on workplace health and safety issues, we work with WorkSafeBC officials to help reduce accidents, injuries and occupational diseases.

It is our belief that our accident rate is too high. We have been stuck with a level of three accidents per 100 workers per year for many years now. We must reduce that number to 0. How do we do that? It is not easy. Everyone has a part to play. Everyone has a responsibility to make it happen.

Every worker and every employer must think safe production first. We must develop a culture of safety. Thirty years ago, drinking and driving was not considered a social taboo. That has changed, and rightly so. Now, we must change our attitudes toward safety.

If a worker doesn't think he should do a job because of a danger, he shouldn't do it until the problem is rectified. If workers see a fellow worker performing an unsafe act, they must stop her. Employers must work with their employees to provide a safe and healthy work environment. Everyone must know what they are accountable for.

And we all must dedicate ourselves to preventing injuries from occurring in the first place.

We have just gone through a period of economic uncertainty during which people lost their jobs. Now the province is building again and employers are hiring. Employers are going to have to fight to attract and retain the best people they can find. One of the best tools an employer has in attracting the best is to be the best. And being the best involves being the safest.

Employers' workplace policies should include training on how to recognize workplace hazards and how to perform risk assessments. It is this behavioural training that will help decrease accidents and injuries.

Some members of the community call for more regulations and inspections. Members of the Employers' Forum do not believe that is the answer. We have speeding laws in place in this province, yet we continue to have speeding drivers. What we need is to change our attitudes toward safety so we do not condone unsafe work practices or conditions.

On April 28, everyone -- employers, workers, labour organizations and WorkSafeBC -- is reminded of our shared responsibilities for workplace health and safety. We may have different perspectives from time to time. But we all hold the common view that these tragedies are completely unacceptable, and that workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatalities are preventable.

We don't want to turn on the news at night to hear the grim tale of another work-related fatality. Each of those victims has a family. The pain and suffering of such a tragedy is something we all would find difficult to bear. We all must do better. Making workplaces safer is a continuing effort -- and we all have a part to play. Each day we must work together to foster a culture of health and safety within our workplaces. Let us all play our part.

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