

PROMISES. PRECAUTIONS. PERSISTENCE.



Preventing worker disability, disease and death.

The COVID crisis has exposed what many workers have long experienced — unaddressed workplace hazards cost them dearly.

On April 28, we observe a National Day of Mourning to remember workers who have been injured, made ill or who have died from all work-related causes, including the virus that causes COVID-19. We remember too it is not enough to mourn. We need preventive action now.

Promises made

What form action should take has also been long understood.

- ✓ Ontario employers must take every reasonable precaution to protect workers.
- ✓ Workers and their representatives must play a full and meaningful role in workplace health and safety matters.
- ✓ Quality training is needed to support these efforts.
- ✓ Better laws and vigorous enforcement are needed too.

These conclusions were supported by two major studies of Ontario's public health and occupational health and safety systems, both in response to preventable tragedies and both accepted by the government of the day.

With his final **SARS Commission report** in December 2006 Justice Archie Campbell made recommendations including:

- ◆ Implementation of the precautionary principle to guide swift prudent action in the absence of scientific certainty; and
- ◆ Proper attention paid to worker voices of concern.

Four years later in 2010 an **Expert Panel report** led by Tony Dean recommended a new approach for Ontario's health and safety system, including enforceable training standards to ensure:

- ✓ Quality training to help meet requirements of Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and regulations such as WHMIS
- ✓ Training for worker health and safety reps in smaller workplaces (employing 5 to 19 persons)
- ✓ Training for working at heights and significant hazards in all sectors
- ✓ Entry level training for construction workers and workers in other sectors too.



Promises yet unfulfilled

Today, after decades old inaction, promises of all these recommendations has gone largely unfulfilled. We need only look around us to see this much.

- ✗ Early and growing evidence of airborne transmission of COVID-19 has gone unheeded, leaving many workers without proper masking and enhanced workplace ventilation.
- ✗ Toxic disinfectants are still widely used despite the availability of safer, effective alternatives.
- ✗ Many joint health and safety committees' (JHSC) and worker reps' concerns have been ignored.
- ✗ Discussions around mandatory training standards have stalled.



As a result, workers have paid the highest price, particularly immigrants, migrants and workers of colour.

- ◆ Complete worker compensation statistics are yet not available for 2020, but we know **as of March 31, 2021 the WSIB allowed** less than 20,000 claims for COVID-19 illness and 46 claims for COVID-related deaths. And we know from **considerable research** all claims are significantly underreported by as much as 70 per cent.
- ◆ Several studies have uncovered the pandemic's considerable toll on worker mental health in the form of debilitating post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression.

Precautions and persistence

The time for study however is over. We know what works. Now is the time to act. While not a panacea for all that ails Ontario workplaces, quality training standards are clearly a good start. Let's revisit too the hard lessons of SARS and for that matter those we have learned throughout the pandemic.

We are not yet finished with the COVID-19 crisis. And in its aftermath, we will still be left with the underlying systemic issues that have been laid bare. Confronting what's before us, short- and long-term, will mean taking every reasonable precaution – together. Advocacy on behalf of worker health and safety will take persistence too.

On April 28, let's mourn for the dead, and every day forward, let's fight for the living. Let's insist on controlling, or better yet eliminating wherever possible, workplace hazards. And, let's insist on mandatory training standards in aid of this very achievable goal.



WHSC is here to help

We are Ontario's only labour-endorsed, government-designated training centre.

We help ensure you get the quality training you need — hazard-based, prevention-focused, worker-to-worker — where and when you need it. Working together, we can save lives and livelihoods.

We are currently scheduling several essential **training programs in virtual classrooms** — *JHSC Certification (Part I, II and refresher), COVID-19, WHMIS, Workplace Violence and Harassment and Psychosocial Hazards and Workplace Mental Health* to name a few. WHSC **Working at Heights** training has resumed in-person with strict COVID protocols. Visit our website and you will also find **information on workplace hazards**, including COVID-19, plus several tools to evaluate, document and address them.



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