

CUPE POLICY STATEMENT
ON HEALTH AND SAFETY

Enough!

CUPE
On the front line

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Over the last 10 years, health and safety issues have been taken from the work floor and put into the joint committee room. And that's left CUPE members and other workers with little power to move our issues forward.

Now, we must open the door and put health and safety back on the activist agenda. Our members' lives and their health depend on it. It's time to plan strategies for building our power to secure safe workplaces. It's time to re-define and expand the definition of health and safety issues to reflect our changing workplaces and the working lives of our members. It's time to find ways to mobilize CUPE members to organize around health and safety.

THE EMPLOYER AGENDA

In recent times, employers and governments have been fairly successful in advancing the view that only "experts" can deal with the complexities of health and safety problems. They've promoted joint committees of managers and union representatives, established by law, as the solution.

But these committees have no power except to make recommendations to management. The idea behind them – that workers and employers have a "common interest" and a "joint stake" in health and safety – is simply false. Also untrue have been the claims that health and safety would advance to a new level if a spirit of co-operation replaced an adversarial relationship.

We just need to look at the facts. The number of fatalities, injuries and occupational diseases are on the rise. **Since the 1970's, an average of 1,000 Canadian workers have been killed on the job each year.** Every year, more than one million workers are injured at work. Around half a million are hurt seriously enough to warrant the payment of workers compensation. An estimated 10,000 workers die each year from occupational diseases. And untold numbers of workers suffer from harassment at work, leading to stress that has real health impacts.

These are staggering figures by any measure.

There have been inroads over the past 50 years, to be sure. But all of them have been due to one thing alone: the front-line struggles of workers over health and safety conditions.

Workers took to the streets, went to the media, and reached out to the community over health and safety issues. These struggles presented health and safety as a very political issue – one that clearly demonstrated the deadly results of unequal power relationships in the workplace.

Actions taken by workers forced governments to pass laws that recognized the precarious life-and-death realities of thousands of workers and their families. We won the legislated rights to refuse, to participate and know. And worker health and safety training became a burning issue.

Unions developed their own training programs to make their members more powerful by increasing their level of technical knowledge. They talked about how to translate their knowledge into action; and how to tap the almost unlimited potential of the membership to mobilize around health and safety. Workers have fought to have discrimination and harassment recognized as real Health and Safety concerns when they exist in our workplaces.

They also fought for joint committees, but never envisioned they would be used by employers and governments to undermine health and safety activism.

OUR INTERESTS NOT THE SAME

The fact is that our members' interests and those of the employer are not the same. Employers have control over the work we do, where we do it and how we do it. They control the pace of our work and whether the conditions are healthy and safe. We're the ones who risk our health and our lives.

Joint health and safety committees are now being used to "depoliticize" health and safety issues. Employers appeal to our members' strong concern about everyone's health and safety. They tell union representatives on joint committees that they aren't there just to represent the interests of union members – that they have a "greater" responsibility to both the employer and workers.

And so, health and safety has become an increasingly specialized field, and many union representatives on committees have become "technical experts." And when CUPE health and safety representatives try to take activist, strong positions – with the employer or their fellow workers – they are often isolated by the employer, and sometimes their co-workers and fellow union members.

RENEWING HEALTH AND SAFETY MILITANCY

CUPE needs to shift the balance of power over our health and safety away from employers and back to workers, where it belongs. We need to reclaim joint committees as worker forums to confront employer power. We need to say, "Enough!" to using joint committees to co-opt union representatives, to threaten solidarity, and to weaken our union.

Our members must have the final say over whether or not their workplace is fit for work, and exercise their right to refuse unsafe work if it's not. We must start acting on all health and safety hazards as if they are life and death situations, because the reality is that our members' health and their lives are on the line. To do this, we need to embark on a major campaign that mobilizes CUPE members to act on our existing workplace rights. But above all, we need a program and a strategy to help workers regain control of the health and safety agenda.

This means making sure employers and governments live up to their responsibility to provide healthy and safe workplaces. And it means confronting employer power over health and safety in many other places: in the workplace, at the bargaining table, and on the streets. Without such action and militant defence of our right to healthy and safe working conditions, the toll of injuries and deaths will continue to climb.

CHALLENGES

We've developed useful tools and strategies to help eliminate some of the "traditional" dangers faced by our members – exposure to chemicals, noise, temperature extremes, poor indoor air quality, and asbestos.

Now, we also need to engage our members in more militant health and safety activism so that we can take on the key health and safety issues of the day. These issues include stress, occupational diseases and workplace violence – which includes all types of harassment, bullying and air rage – and the physical and emotional injuries resulting from cutbacks, privatization and excessive workload. The health and safety threats created by homophobia, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination are a specific challenge for health and safety activists.

We must address these challenges in every way – through collective bargaining, by raising awareness and building support on-the-ground for the fight for healthy and safe workplaces (including

active membership resistance as problems arise), by integrating health and safety issues into our locals' daily priorities, and through our joint committee work. We need to renew our focus on workers' rights. We simply can't hand these critical and tough issues over to health and safety representatives to deal with alone.

We also need to address all forms of harassment that lead to a poisoned workplace environment, stress and often violence.

Aboriginal communities and other marginalized communities experience increased environmental hazards, such as toxic waste dumping and unsafe water. The process of concentrating environmental hazards in particular communities based on race is known as environmental racism. These practices must be exposed and challenged.

CUPE'S PLAN OF ACTION

The need for health and safety militancy must be understood by members at all levels of CUPE. Health and safety activism needs the support and participation of the entire union leadership, as well as broad support from the membership. Building this support has to be our main task in the year ahead.

MAKING HEALTH AND SAFETY A UNION ISSUE

We can't rely on employers or government to resolve our health and safety problems. It's up to us, and we must work to mobilize our entire membership to take action. Activists need to talk about the root causes of health and safety problems. Locals must organize so that we can gain power and control over our lives. We have to start treating all health and safety problems as *union issues*, just like collective bargaining and grievance handling.

CUPE will:

- Reject employer and government arguments of a joint stake or common interest in the health and safety of our members.
- Encourage all workers to exercise their legal right to refuse unsafe work.
- Urge all activists to take collective job action wherever unsafe working conditions exist.
- Push to put health and safety concerns on the bargaining table and keep them there until our demands are met.
- Train health and safety committees to recognize and take action on all forms of occupational health and safety hazards involving stress, workplace violence, and harassment.
- Take to the streets to force governments into action.

TAKING CONTROL IN JOINT COMMITTEES

We must take back the balance of power over our health and safety so that we have the final say over whether or not our work is safe. Committees must be strengthened – at the local level and at the workplace level – and become places where the employer's agenda is resisted. While the law limits committees to making recommendations, we can push for change by re-politicizing the role of our members on committees.

CUPE will:

- Support CUPE local unions to create or strengthen health and safety representative positions, reporting to the executive and the membership.
- Support every local to have an active local union health and safety committee.
- Ensure that all CUPE Divisions have active health and safety committees.
- Insist on active workplace joint health and safety committees.
- Support locals to develop closer links with their health and safety activists, so that they see themselves as part of the union.
- Demand that CUPE members on committees become advocates for the rights of workers, and represent CUPE's positions on basic workers' rights.
- Encourage health and safety committees to take part in equality training courses.

- Work with local unions to insist that representatives on joint health and safety committees be accountable to locals through regular reporting.
- Push for joint committees to have the power to make decisions and not just recommendations to management.
- Fight to ensure committees are not co-opted by employers as a way to weaken the union or threaten solidarity.

TACKLE CONCERNS OF THE DAY

Union representatives must expand the scope of issues discussed by the joint health and safety committees to include new or emerging hazards.

CUPE will:

- Raise awareness among members that issues of workload, stress, discrimination, harassment and violence should be discussed and documented as occupational hazards.
- Support health and safety activists to bring issues such as workload to the joint committees for resolution.
- Ensure that all injuries and illnesses arising from new or emerging hazards, such as HIV/AIDS, are documented and dealt with by the joint committee.
- Demand that employers be held accountable for their legislated obligations to prevent injuries and illnesses and to uphold human rights as part of their obligations.

EDUCATE MEMBERS THE CUPE WAY

CUPE has developed new training courses that promote health and safety activism and give health and safety representatives the tools they need to confront employers and governments. The courses will help CUPE local representatives become advocates for taking back control of joint health and safety committees.

CUPE will:

- Encourage locals to reject employer-controlled health and safety training.
- Develop a plan and campaign to ensure that each CUPE member sitting on a joint health and safety committee is provided with CUPE-developed and CUPE-delivered training.
- Fight for governments and employers to recognize CUPE health and safety training.
- Integrate emerging issues like stress, harassment, discrimination and violence in the workplace into health and safety training material.

GET FAIR COMPENSATION

CUPE's health and safety program is all about preventing health and safety problems. But when prevention fails, CUPE must also be prepared to act to ensure fair compensation for injured workers.

CUPE will:

- Continue to push for prevention of illnesses and injuries.
- Assist in securing just compensation for injured workers.
- Advocate for the privacy of medical information.
- Ensure injured workers are accommodated and are able to return to meaningful work.
- Fight for our members at compensation boards and in the courts if necessary.
- Bargain return to work protocols for people with HIV and AIDS.
- Train members to serve as injured worker advocates for members.
- Continue to push for full recognition of stress, harassment, and violence in the workplace as occupational diseases for which workers' compensation benefits must be given.

SUPPORT YOUTH

Young workers, including workers of color and Aboriginal youth, face unique health and safety challenges. Most employers do not provide adequate information or training about the hazards these workers will face on the job. The experience of CUPE's health and safety activists provides an opportunity to merge their knowledge with the drive of young workers to confront the employers' health and safety agenda.

CUPE will develop and help deliver training and information for young workers that:

- Documents the history and politics of health and safety struggles.
- Bridges the age gap between experienced activists and youth.
- Outlines the rights of young workers to safe and healthy work.
- Documents the unique hazards faced by young workers.
- Explains where and how to get assistance when they have problems.
- Ensure that young workers know that a healthy and safe workplace is one without harassment and discrimination.

ORGANIZE FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

When workers first began to organize, health and safety was one of the issues that brought them into unions. Unions were the vehicles they could use to fight from a position of strength for their dignity, rights and improved working conditions. Health and safety continues to be a fundamental issue common to all workers, in organized and unorganized workplaces. Renewing health and safety activism must also include using health and safety in our organizing drives.

CUPE will:

- Develop an action plan to use health and safety as an organizing tool.
- Create sector-specific information kits.
- Ensure that organizers are able to access the expertise of CUPE health and safety staff.

TAKING CONTROL

As Canada's largest union, CUPE is perfectly positioned to take an ambitious political and militant stand on workers' health and safety. Most CUPE locals have at least one health and safety committee in place. If every one of our locals works to implement our action plan, we can spark renewed health and safety activism from coast to coast to coast, and change our members' lives for the better.

Our challenge is clear – we need to bring health and safety back into the fold of the union, where it belongs. Locals must organize around health and safety, and provide support for our local union committees. And CUPE must redouble its efforts to support health and safety activism to safeguard all aspects of our members' working lives.

CUPE members are sick and tired, and have had enough. We demand safe workplaces. We demand control over what happens to our bodies and our lives. We demand these changes now.

