



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

work *life*

“We asked for workers; we got people instead”

The above quote, by one of Swiss author Max Frisch’s characters, succinctly captures the inherent conflict between employers and workers. Employers want results; they want productivity, machine-perfect timing and energy for the lowest wage possible. Workers want a living wage, benefits, a pleasant workplace, some say over the work process. They want work/life balance so they can enjoy life after work and spend time with their families.

But in reality many work for less than a living wage in difficult circumstances. Even many union-protected new Canadian workers face challenges that seem impossible to the average Canadian. So much of the work they do is dirty, dangerous, demoralizing and exhausting. Working in hog or chicken processing plants, for example, is not only physically demanding, it assaults the spirit and breaks the heart.

Having to spend so much time in such a traumatic environment makes it difficult to gain a sense of control over your work life, and the workplace injuries that occur on these jobs add to a worker’s feeling of helplessness. This vulnerability is heightened when workers don’t speak the dominant language or if they’re not citizens, with the possibility of been sent back to their country of origin at the drop of a hat.

Protecting the rights of and advocating for Manitoba’s most vulnerable workers is an important part of what the Occupational Health Centre (OHC) does. Started in 1983, the OHC’s mandate is to educate and advocate for safer workplaces and to those injured on or made sick by their work. The Centre does not just concentrate on physical safety; it also recognises the importance of reducing workplace

stress that can affect workers’ emotional and physical health.

Anyone can seek the services of the Centre where professional staff, including nurses and doctors who specialize in workplace injuries, are available to diagnose and counsel patients. These specialists understand that the link between work and health moves both ways: healthy employees work better and better work places keep workers healthy.

The Centre also engages in education and community outreach and is active at work sites where it provides such services as workplace surveys and in-house training. The Centre is involved in cultural community development, reaching out to 13 different cultural communities in their own languages. Finally, the Centre has the largest in-print resource centre in Western Canada where employers and employees alike can access materials concerning workplace health and safety.

The full name of the Centre is the Manitoba Federation of Labour Occupational Health Centre— the connection with labour is unbreakable. Manitobans are fortunate to have a labour movement that recognized the need for the OHC and which instilled its values in the organization. Whether it be making sure that injured workers can get a quick medical opinion to move along a Workers Compensation claim, educating employers about ergonomically-designed work stations or assisting the Centre in its work with vulnerable newcomers, the labour movement’s values of worker protection and solidarity are at the heart of the Centre’s efforts, and those values are just as relevant today as they’ve ever been.

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ERROL BLACK CHAIR

EBC

IN LABOUR ISSUES

The OHC is being honored at the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues Brunch on Nov. 2nd. Dr. Linda Murray, first physician at the OHC will give the keynote address.

Doug Smith's "An injury to all" provides a comprehensive history of workplace health and safety in Manitoba. In the first half of the last century, workers had scant protection and training and were more than likely to be considered the authors of their own misfortune when injured on the job. It wasn't until Ed Schreyer's government adopted the Workplace Safety and Health Act in 1976 that workers were granted the right to refuse unsafe work. But workers can only refuse unsafe work if they understand workplace hazards. Lyon's Conservative government took power after Schreyer's NDP and it fought to claw back the reach of the new Act, arguing that safety and health civil servants should not promote the Act vigorously, but should rather "be primarily engaged in reacting to complaints". Meanwhile many workers were unknowingly being exposed to industrial lead poisoning.

Smith explains that dozens of Manitoban workers had to go on compensation because of the high levels of lead in their bodies. As worker advocates from unions and the MFL learnt more about the lead-poisoning crisis, questions arose. Luis Rufo from the Molders union began to understand the problems of having a company doctor treat these men: where did the doctors' loyalty lie – with the patient or with the boss? And why were they waiting for workers to get sick, rather than preventing them from getting sick? Why were the men not educated about the dangers of being exposed to lead?

Rufo and others saw a clear need for a health clinic that specialized in injuries and illness caused by 'sick workplaces'. When the Lyon government rejected the idea, the MFL, under the leadership of Dick Martin, picked it up in 1979 and by 1983 was able to open the doors of what we know today as the OHC. The

Centre's first fulltime physician, Dr. Linda Murray, stated "We are faced with chronic diseases that build up over a long time as well as environmental and occupations diseases that are a result of our industrial world." Since opening, the Centre's dedicated staff has not stopped caring and advocating for workers.

Some workplace hazards, such as lead, may have been reduced or eliminated, but new ones continue to emerge. There are still dark places in the Canadian labour market where workers are hurting: temporary foreign workers, new Canadians; many youth, First Nations, people of colour, seniors and others are labouring in these dangerous places.

The OHC exists because workers of all kinds are vulnerable, but many have lost touch with that reality. All workers need to remember that the struggle so many precarious workers are experiencing is every worker's struggle. No worker should think that she is never going to need the services of organizations like the OHC.

The dissonance between wanting workers and getting people is never going to go away. Luckily for all workers, the OHC has never forgotten that work should be about people and community and dignity and safety. The OHC doesn't help workers; it helps people – and advocates for their right to know about workplace hazards, and their right to remain safe and healthy on the job.

Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the CCPA MB.

This article relied heavily on information in Doug Smith's *An Injury to All: A History of the Occupational Safety and Health Movement in Manitoba* (Manitoba Education Labour Centre: 1995).

work life