



HEALTH
&
SAFETY

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9TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE A SUCCESS

**STEP
UP!
TAKE ACTION!**

In order to step up and take action on health and safety issues, members need the right tools. That's what they got at CUPE's ninth National Health and Safety Conference held in Montreal in October 2004.

"What you're doing at the workshops is figuring out who's kicking you in the ass and why," said Dr. Linda Murray, whose address kicked off two days of intensive workshops.

Murray was the first in a lineup of great guest speakers. She set the tone for the conference with a realistic but hopeful talk about occupational health and safety as a basic human right. She encouraged participants to look at health and safety as political action, to understand there are power imbalances that need to be addressed by health and safety activists.

Participants had the choice of attending joint committees, ergonomics, indoor air quality, or toxins workshops. Topics were decided through feedback from members.

The committees workshop, a revamped version of one offered at the 2001 National Health and Safety Conference, was all about politics at the joint union-employer table. Participants worked on strategies to step up activism and improve the committee process to become more effective.

Members in the ergonomics workshop considered tools and tactics to deal with the most common occupational injuries in Canada: repetitive strain injuries from poor workplace ergonomics. Overwork, stress, work

organization and other factors were discussed in light of the latest information and strategies.

Despite innovations in building construction and systems, indoor air quality remains a serious hazard for CUPE members. Participants exchanged ideas on indoor air quality hazards and political action to achieve changes.

Workplace toxins need immediate action and participants in that workshop got down to it. They tackled

ways to understand and eliminate the effects of toxins with the underlying goal of making workplaces and communities safer.

The key to every workshop was the exchange of ideas and information between participants: CUPE members know their jobs and always have the best solutions to eliminate hazards in the workplace.

WOMEN'S ATTENDANCE SETS RECORD

Half of the delegates at October's National Health and Safety Conference were women. It was the first time in CUPE's history that the level of women participating truly reflected the greater population.

"I enjoyed it," said Sandra Carruthers, who attended for the first time. Carruthers, vice-president of CUPE Local 2718, works in a group home north of Montreal.

"I learned a lot and the speakers were great," said Paula Pacheco, a head cook at a private nursing home in Winnipeg and president of CUPE Local 2039.

Anthony Pizzino, director of CUPE National's Health and Safety Branch, acknowledged the record attendance but offered a sobering reminder: "People's bodies are hurting. And in many cases, it's women who are suffering, particularly those who work in health care."

The strong attendance level of women was reflected in the makeup of each workshop. Most workshops had an even split between men and women. However, there were several ergonomic workshops and a committees workshop in which women outnumbered men.

SPEAKERS INSPIRE DELEGATES

Four guest speakers – Linda Murray, Katherine Lippel, Robert Storey and Karen Messing – delivered clear, intelligent and strong union-friendly messages to participants at the conference.

LINDA MURRAY



A former CUPE member from Winnipeg's Occupational Health and Safety Clinic, physician Linda Murray now works with numerous health agencies in and around Chicago. Murray urged participants to acquire information and knowledge at the workshops because, "if you have incomplete knowledge and know you're getting kicked in the ass but you don't have enough knowledge to know who's doing it, that's a problem."

She urged participants to grab power in the workplace by using their knowledge: "The real experts are not the folks with degrees after their name. The real experts are the people that work in the workplace." By addressing the power imbalance, Murray said, "we have safer and healthier workplaces."

Murray spoke about the importance of collective action to bring strong health and safety values to our workplaces: "Collectively we can change what goes on in our factories, in our mines, in our offices." She went on to give a context for the health and safety movement: "We are not here alone sitting in a hotel in Montreal just as CUPE members. We are really part of a worldwide movement to meet basic human needs."

CUPE members, said Murray, have no choice in terms of fighting for better health and safety: "Either we lie down and be quiet and continue to be exploited and abused and continue to add names to that banner year after year, or we can do a simple thing and stand up and fight."

KATHERINE LIPPEL



A professor of law at the University of Quebec in Montreal, Katherine Lippel specializes in legal issues with occupational health and safety.

Lippel's talk focused on a new amendment to the Act Respecting Labour Standards in Quebec that deals with psychological harassment at work. She called the regulation "a breakthrough for all workers."

The new regulation allows psychologically-harassed workers to apply for compensation. Lippel quoted a section of the regulation: "Every employee has a right to a work environment free from psychological harassment." She explained this means, "employers have a responsibility to create a harassment-free environment," and they have to be proactive about preventing workplace harassment.

The Act defines psychological harassment as, "any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions or gestures, that affects an employee's dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee."

Lippel concluded by saying, "the application of this Act is relatively recent. Over the months and years to come, we will learn what impact it has in concrete terms in the workplace."

ROBERT STOREY



Robert Storey is a labour studies professor at McMaster University, and his talk was an inspirational call to health and safety activists to “remind their bosses that their health is not for sale.”

Storey pointed out that his interviews with activists and injured workers showed that “they want occupational health and safety established as a core union issue ranking alongside wages, benefits and pensions.” Activists also told Storey that health and safety needs to be brought “back into local unions where the movement began.”

Joint occupational health and safety committees must be reworked into union occupational health and safety committees, he said. Activists must change things like the IRS (Internal Responsibility System) and joint committees so that health and safety regains its radical roots.

He reminded participants that, “we need to remember what brought rank and file industrial workers, trade union leaders, and middle-class university-educated political radicals together in the late 1970s was a shared belief that people did not go to work to get injured, diseased and killed.”

KAREN MESSING



Karen Messing researches occupational and environmental health issues as a professor of biology at the University of Quebec in Montreal. She specializes in looking at work in different ways and changing commonly-held perceptions about work through careful research.

Messing especially looks at the way work is done by women and explores common gender misperceptions. Citing an example, Messing spoke about women workers’ stress levels. She talked about observing a receptionist with a young child and said that it “was a full-time job in itself for this worker to try and reconcile her hours of work with her family responsibilities because of irregular work hours.”

Other research in a chronic-care hospital, Messing said, showed that men and women workers seemed to be in conflict over lifting duties. The men felt that they were doing too

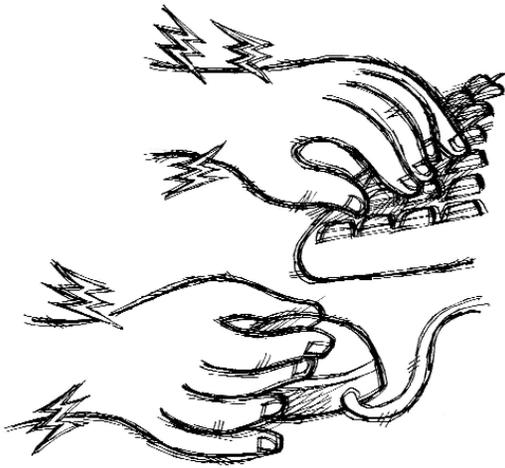
much lifting but Messing’s research showed that women workers were doing just as much lifting as the men. She concluded that “what’s wrong is the total workload” for both men and women, not that one group does more work than the other.

When Messing looked at the classification of light and heavy duties in hospitals, she found that back injuries resulted not from heavy work, but from tasks incorrectly identified as light work. These tasks, which were classified as light work, actually involved intense repetitive stooping and bending movements.

Messing encouraged delegates to look carefully at changes to their work and workplaces in order to make sure they actually benefit workers. She called on CUPE and all unions to find innovative and effective ways to support women workers and fulfill their health and safety needs.

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RSI DAY



Monday, February 28, 2005, is International RSI Awareness Day. RSIs (Repetitive Strain Injuries) are a family of painful disorders affecting tendons, muscles, nerves and joints. They cause persistent or recurring pain most commonly in the neck, shoulders, forearms, hands, wrists and elbows.

The first RSI Awareness Day was February 29, 2000, because it was the only non-repetitive day of the year. In non-leap years, like this year, it is observed on February 28.

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RSIs are caused by poor work organization factors:

- Staff layoffs and privatization
- Unnecessary overtime
- Improper equipment and tools
- Standardized equipment and tools that are designed for only one body type
- Substandard workstation design
- Increased pace of work
- Poorly maintained equipment
- Inadequate training
- Improper temperature and humidity
- Excessive vibration from tools and equipment

Make sure your workplace observes International RSI Awareness Day on February 28. For more information and to obtain copies of CUPE's RSI Health and Safety fact sheet, contact the National Health and Safety Branch or visit www.cupe.ca

NEW FACT SHEETS AVAILABLE

The National Health and Safety Branch has recently revised some fact sheets to reflect changes in various fields of health and safety. The revised fact sheets are:

- Repetitive Strain Injuries
- Indoor Air Quality
- Ventilation
- Noise

To obtain copies contact the National Branch or see the website at www.cupe.ca

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