

Overwork



What is overwork?

Overwork is a health and safety hazard affecting more and more CUPE members. It occurs when workers have too many tasks and too little time to complete them.

Signs of overwork include:

- Working long hours
- Facing unreasonable demands
- Juggling multiple tasks and skills
- Feeling pressured into working overtime, paid or unpaid
- Having fewer breaks, days off, holidays and vacation time
- Dealing with a faster-paced and higher-pressure work environment
- Being monitored and evaluated on performance
- Facing unrealistic expectations from management
- Being given additional tasks, often unrelated to your actual job (like doing more than one job)

What causes overwork?

Overwork is caused by how work is organized. Employers are making fewer workers do more. This shift in control takes away power from workers and gives it completely to employers.

Here are some common causes of overwork in the public sector:

- Organizational changes caused by budget cuts, restructuring and privatization
- Employer management practices like conflicting demands, poor training and support, poor work distribution and unrealistic deadlines
- Staffing and resources problems like not replacing workers, increasing worker-to-service recipient ratios, outdated or broken equipment, staff reductions and increasing the number of casual or temporary workers
- Working conditions like isolation, ineffective health and safety committees, loss of job control and feeling pressure from management
- Increasing workloads caused by poor maintenance of existing resources or by greater need from the service recipient

Who is affected by overwork?

CUPE jobs have been under attack for years. Every public sector service where CUPE members work has been affected by cutbacks and underfunding. This has led to widespread overwork.

What are the effects of overwork?

Overwork poses hazards to the physical and mental health of workers, extending its negative effects to their family lives.

The effects of overwork include:

- Stress
- Burnout, including exhaustion and fatigue
- Musculoskeletal injuries
- Depression and anxiety
- Gastrointestinal disorders and other health conditions
- Family conflict
- Death

The cumulative impact of overwork can be devastating for workers.

Intersectionality

Members of equity-deserving groups may have additional stressors to deal with, like violence or discrimination based on race, culture, origin, ability, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation. Intergenerational trauma, like from colonization or racism, can cause mistrust of the health care or security systems we typically count on for help. Any action proposed must be respectful and inclusive.

What can unions do about overwork?

Step 1: Identify the problem

If you observe the signs mentioned earlier in your workplace and members are facing similar health problems, it is likely that overwork is playing a role.

Surveys and mapping techniques are helpful for identifying hazards related to overwork. You can collaborate with the employer to conduct a survey, where the union approves and participates in collecting and evaluating information. If the employer opposes doing a survey or denies that overwork is an issue, the union should conduct its own survey.

Step 2: Act

Overwork hazards primarily relate to control and work organization. Pushing back against overwork requires workers to exert their own control in the workplace.

Actions workers can take:

- Take your breaks
- Refuse to work in unsafe conditions caused by overwork
- Report overwork hazards using health and safety reporting forms
- Discuss your options with your steward, including filing a grievance
- Raise overwork concerns during joint health and safety committee meetings

Actions unions can take:

- Propose an overwork prevention policy through the health and safety committee
- Use collective bargaining to eliminate overwork hazards
 - Define boundaries in job descriptions to prevent overwork
 - Include provisions for the joint health and safety committee to investigate overwork and make policy recommendations
- Advocate for fair and manageable workloads
- Emphasize the importance of safe paces of work
- Push for staffing levels that ensure safety

Overwork and the law

To effectively address overwork, we need federal and provincial laws that specifically deal with this problem. These laws should include:

- Recognizing overwork as a health and safety hazard
- Making overwork illegal
- Giving joint occupational health and safety committees the power to investigate and resolve health and safety complaints related to overwork
- Granting the right to refuse work when overwork puts the health and safety of workers or others at risk
- Setting limits on maximum overtime
- Establishing safe staffing ratios

CUPE members and locals should lobby their members of parliament or provincial representatives to pass laws that address overwork.

Filing for compensation

Unions should file compensation claims for illnesses or “accidents” that have an overwork element. This approach helps to connect overwork with compensation and holds employers accountable for the impacts of overwork.

CUPE’s commitment

CUPE is committed to addressing overwork. Member participation is crucial. For more guidance, contact your national representative or visit cupe.ca.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

CUPE National Health and Safety Branch 1375 St. Laurent Boulevard, OTTAWA, ON K1G 0Z7
Tel: (844) 237-1590 (toll free) Email: health_safety@cupe.ca



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