

Day of Mourning: Psychological health and safety is worker safety

On April 28, workers across Canada come together to mourn the dead and fight for the living. It is a day of remembrance and a call to action.

This year, we are shining a light on an urgent but too often overlooked issue: psychological health and safety at work. Workplace injuries are not only physical. Stress, burnout, harassment, violence, and other psychological harms caused by work are real injuries, and they are preventable. They are not “just part of the job.”

Every worker in Canada has the right to safe work. It’s an employer’s responsibility to manage physical, ergonomic and chemical hazards to keep workers safe. Psychosocial hazards must be treated with the same seriousness. Employers have a duty to protect workers from psychological injuries, just as they would protect workers operating heavy machinery.

The reality facing workers today is stark. Psychological health and illness are now the leading cause of disability in Canada. Nearly half of working Canadians say their job is the most stressful part of their daily lives, and seven in ten workers are concerned about the psychological health and safety of their workplace. *We need to recognize that workplace physical injuries can trigger workplace psychological injuries, which both need to be addressed before someone can return to work.*

In 2023 alone, more than 8,500 workplace mental health injury claims were accepted by workers’ compensation boards. According to that data, health care, education, public services, and the trades are among the hardest-hit sectors, due to issues like chronic understaffing, unmanageable workloads, and a lack of resources, to name just a few. And we know these numbers only tell part of the story. Psychological injuries are widely underreported; workers are discouraged from speaking up, claims are denied, and too many people suffer in silence.

[Insert 2–3 lines here with local statistics, workplace trends, or a brief community story, if desired.]

Psychological health and safety are already recognized in federal and some provincial occupational health and safety laws across Canada. Canada has also ratified International Labour Organization Convention 190, which requires governments to ensure workers are free from violence and harassment in the world of work. But recognition on paper is not enough.

Workers need enforceable protections and real prevention. Employers must be required to identify psychosocial hazards – such as excessive workloads, toxic workplace cultures, violence, and harassment – and to work with workers and health and safety committees to control them. Ignoring psychological hazards is not an option.

In a time when it feels like there are new crises every week, workers are already carrying a heavy mental load. Work should not add to that burden. No one should have to sacrifice their mental health to earn a living.

Just as we don't accept unsafe scaffolding or asbestos exposure, we should never accept working conditions that harm workers' psychological health.

That's why we are calling on all levels of government to act. Psychological health must be treated with the same seriousness as physical health under occupational health and safety and workers' compensation systems in every jurisdiction. Governments must work together to implement a national, coordinated approach to addressing psychosocial hazards so every worker is protected, no matter where they live or what kind of work they do. Employers must be required to conduct proactive risk assessments and put prevention plans in place. And enforcement must be strengthened through sufficient, unannounced inspections.

April 28 is about remembering those we have lost and honouring those whose lives were forever changed by workplace injury and illness. But it is also about the responsibility we owe to today's workers.

Every worker deserves to come home safe at the end of the day – safe in body and in mind. Working together, Canada's unions will continue to fight for workplaces that are truly safe, healthy, and respectful for all.