

BULLETIN

## Mourn for the dead, but keep fighting for the living

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by MAUREEN HEADLEY



**his month**, on April 28, Canadians will commemorate the Day of Mourning ... a day of remembrance for working people killed or injured on the job.

In the Lower Mainland, the Vancouver and District Labour Council, New Westminster and District Labour Council and BC Federation of Labour will mark the day at Surreys Bear Creek Park, and will highlight tragic workplace deaths that serve as a reminder of the need for continued advocacy on occupational health and safety issues. The biggest tragedy in each of those cases is that the deaths were needless. They were preventable.

One of the incidents to be highlighted at the Day of Mourning will be the deaths of three farmworkers in Abbotsford earlier this year. The BC Federation of Labour has submitted 29 recommendations to Labour Minister Olga Ilich to improve the working conditions and safety of BC farmworkers. The Federation is calling on government to put solutions in place to protect the lives of farmworkers.

The recommendations include calls for improvements to traffic and vehicle safety, better seat belt laws and tougher fines to address the overcrowding and poor condition of vehicles transporting farmworkers.

As well, the Federation is recommending the provincial government not renew its Memorandum of Agreement with the agriculture industry, and that no new agreement should be signed without the participation and support of farmworkers and their advocates. Additionally, the recommendations include giving farmworkers full rights to employment standards as enjoyed by other BC workers, as well as better enforcement of these standards.

Prevention, as well as enforcement of workplace occupational health and safety regulations, has been a victim of cutbacks and lack of government commitment. The result is continued risk to workers in all fields.

In health care and social services, a significant risk to workers is violence in the workplace, and employers and government have been slow to take the necessary steps to reduce the risk to employees.

In the wake of the violent death of HSA member David Bland in 2005, who worked at Richmond Mental Health and was murdered by a former client, the then deputy minister of health issued an edict to all health authorities to be in compliance with WorkSafe regulations on workplace violence prevention by November

2006. And while individual health authorities are all working at various rates on getting into compliance, it has been almost a year and a half and the process continues to drag on.

This is an important issue for the 15,000 HSA members who work in health and social services. And a recent Statistics Canada report explains why: It is in these fields that workers experience the most risk of violence in the workplace ... 33 per cent of workplace violence incidents involved a victim who worked in social assistance or health care services.

This Statistics Canada report confirms what we already knew from experience and WorkSafe BC statistics: health care is a dangerous profession.

The people who we all count on to take care of the sick and vulnerable in our community go to work everyday knowing that they are at risk of violence and injury. Between 2001-2005, four people working in that sector were murdered at work.

One alarming statistic out of this report is that only 37 per cent of workplace violence incidents are reported to police. That means that people working in health care ... and other industries ... just accept that violence is a part of the job. This is an important statistic, as it is the first research that confirms what we and WCB have suspected: that violent incidents in the workplace are underreported.

This is significant particularly in health care, which accounts for 40 per cent of all accepted claims related to workplace violence.

Its time for us to recognize that our workplaces can be dangerous. But rather than accepting the risk, we must demand changes to make our workplaces safer.

April 28 is an important day for all of us to renew our commitment to eradicate violence in our workplaces and to resolve to demand action from Worksafe BC and the Ministry of Health on this critical issue. 

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