

The health and safety of workers must be a top priority of Government

By Rick Clarke

The National Day of Mourning held each year on April 28 remembers and pays tribute to the more than 1,000 workers who are killed each year due to workplace causes. This day, although a Canadian initiative, is recognized and observed around the world.

Although this year marks the 25th anniversary of the National Day of Mourning; still over 1000 Canadians were killed at or because of work with an alarming increase in workplace fatalities in Nova Scotia - 29 workers were killed, the highest number of workplace deaths since Westray. In addition, almost 32,000 workers were injured on the job. Clearly more needs to be done to protect workers to ensure they are able to return home at the end of their day.

This is not to say that nothing is being done or accomplished. Many workplaces have good health and safety programs, with joint occupational health and safety committees trained and in place; workplace stakeholders are working together in conjunction with the Workers' Compensation Board and the Department of Labour and Workforce Development in efforts to make our workplaces safer and there is ongoing public awareness efforts particularly focused on our youth, on the hazards faced and the need for greater focus on good health and safety practices and programs.

However, given the statistics before us, it is alarmingly clear that we have so much more to do, if we are to truly reduce the pain and suffering from workplace accidents and illness.

The Internal Responsibility System (IRS) which has been the basis of Occupational Health & Safety in Nova Scotia since 1986 and entrenched in the Act for 12 years, has not worked as intended because mandatory training; regulatory support and enforcement have yet to be in place to support it.

IRS has failed workers because Government has failed the IRS. Good laws are supported and **enforced** laws.

After a quarter century of remembering and paying tribute to the thousand plus workers that have been killed at or because of work each year; we believe it is beyond the time for government to assume a more proactive role in protecting our workers.

It is abundantly clear that enforcement of existing laws must be improved and that there is a need for new or improved health and safety regulations in a number of areas.

We are calling for special prosecutors to be set up in each province and territory and at the federal level where appropriate. The task of these special prosecutors would be to investigate and lay criminal charges where it is found that employer's actions or inactions have resulted in serious injury or death.

As with drinking and driving, actions are needed to make it socially unacceptable to continue with the high levels of workplace accidents, injuries and fatalities seen every year. This needs to be at the top of the agenda of the Nova Scotia government. We believe the Premier should publicly announce that a proper health and safety program in every Nova Scotia workplace will be a priority of government.

As we mourn for the victims, there is a collective responsibility of all; business, labour and government to take up the challenge, commitment and responsibility to fight for the living, providing them with healthy and safe workplaces. The workers of today and tomorrow are depending on us to ensure that every measure is taken, every resource provided and every authority given or put in place to enable them to return home from work at the end of the day safe and healthy. They deserve nothing less!

A person's life should not be at risk when they are at work. Every workplace death or injury is preventable. We are committed to continue our campaign for better enforcement of existing occupational health and safety legislation and for stronger legislation to ensure every Nova Scotian will come home from work, injury-free.

Rick Clarke is the President of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, the provincial voice of labour. A Day of Mourning Ceremony will take place at Province House at 11 a.m. on April 28.