

Let's Have an End to People Dying at Work

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Saturday, April 28, 2012

<http://politicsrespun.org/2012/04/lets-have-an-end-to-people-dying-at-work/>

Ben Isitt is a Victoria city councillor, historian, professor, lawyer and optimist.

Rarely have I been so moved by an account of the struggle working people have in the face of this new world order of anti-worker 1%ism.

We are so effectively trained to accept the balance of power is heavily tilted towards employers and employer-friendly/funded governments that we miss out on obvious things like our own rights.

So let's not tolerate any more mill explosions, indifferent employers and governments, and neglected health and safety training.

Here is the text of the speech I gave at Victoria's Day of Mourning ceremony for workers killed or injured on the job, held on April 28, 2012 and organized by the Victoria Labour Council and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 50:

DAY OF MOURNING SPEECH

VICTORIA, BC

April 28, 2012

Ben addressed 200 people at the annual Day of Mourning in Victoria for workers killed or injured on the job.

As an elected official, let me start by thanking CUPE Local 50 and the Victoria Labour Council for organizing today's event.

They have reminded us that the health, safety and wellbeing of workers must remain a central concern and responsibility of the labour movement itself.

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Over time, we have seen employer and government initiatives to replace the self-activity of workers with cumbersome bureaucratic procedures.

Too often, these new procedures are designed to serve the interests of employers, rather than workers.

For example, Workers' Compensation emerged a hundred years ago to limit the legal liability of

employers.

Workers and their families lost the right to sue employers for damages, for death or injury arising from negligence.

More than 400 coal miners had been killed on Vancouver Island in the decades leading up to this legislation, as employers such as Robert Dunsmuir cut safety procedures to boost production and maximize profits.

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Today, in the drive for cost-cutting, “restraint” and “austerity” – we see the same basic problem – employers who are quick to ignore safety warnings, saving costs while threatening the life and wellbeing of workers who make their profits.

The investigation of the Prince George explosion is ongoing, but I believe we may find that this was a preventable tragedy – that warnings relating to sawdust were ignored by the employer.

It is often more convenient and profitable to cling to a “business as usual” approach.

But workers and their families can be devastated as a result.

The Prince George incident suggests we need much stronger enforcement of workplace safety, and potentially stiffer penalties – both criminal and financial – against employers whose actions or negligence contribute to the death or injury of workers.

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At the same time we fight to strengthen laws, we need to remain vigilant in defending the principle of the right to refuse unsafe work – whether or not this principle is sanctioned or not in provincial statute or in the language of collective agreements.

There was an era of “labour before the law,” when all actions by unions to advance the interests of workers were deemed criminal and punished with fines, injunctions and jail terms.

Sometimes, basic humanitarian values – most notably respect for human life – run up against laws enacted in employer-friendly legislatures.

Such moments underscore the need for working class self activity to uphold community values.

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IN CONCLUSION, thanks again to CUPE Local 50 and the Victoria Labour Council for reminding us that workers cannot always look to government or employers to help them.

In this era of “austerity,” the need for working-class self-activity and solidarity to improve

conditions of life and work will become increasingly clear and increasingly essential

via [Day of Mourning | Ben Isitt](#).