

BULLETIN

Labour demands action on workplace safety as activists lobby provincial government

May 2, 2007

Members of the BC Federation of Labour's Occupational Health and Safety Committee headed to Victoria Monday, April 30 to press the case for better workplace safety enforcement and decent pensions for workers injured on the job.

The lobby, headed by Federation President Jim Sinclair and Secretary-Treasurer Angela Schira, comes on the heels of Day of Mourning ceremonies across BC that marked the beginning of a month of labour action to win safer workplaces.

"Our challenge to government is very simple," Sinclair said. "It's time to step up enforcement, tighten the rules, hold employers accountable and take better care of workers who become sick or injured on the job."

More than 200 union members and elected officials, including HSA President Reid Johnson, gathered in Surrey's Bear Creek Park Saturday for a Day of Mourning event that focused on the recent highway death of three farmworkers headed to a greenhouse in an unsafe van.

After a moment of silence for those who died, Sinclair told the crowd how he observed more workers being forced to travel in an unsafe van just three days after the fatalities.

"There is a systematic lack of respect for those human beings to force them into an unsafe vehicle just days after three people died," he said.

Dhania Sooner, a relative of one of those who died, demanded "action to no one ever loses a mother or a sister again." Gurcharan Dhillon told how the infant child of one of those killed "is still hoping his mother will return."

The ceremony was attended by civic officials from Surrey and MLAs from both parties in the Legislature.

"We're still witnessing far too many workplace fatalities and injuries that can be prevented if we step up enforcement," said Sinclair.

Last year an inspection blitz by the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) of 300 forest industry job sites resulted in 650 orders for compliance issued by the Board. As well, a WCB inspection blitz of 366 gas stations, according to the WCB, "found significant levels of non-compliance with safety regulations."

Following the deaths of the three farmworkers in March, re-instated roadside spot checks found that 37 percent of farm labour passenger vans failed to meet safety standards. The failures included 51 vans that had mechanical violations, 18 cases of load security violations and nine vans failed because the driver did not have the correct class of licence.

Working with the families of crash victims, the Federation presented 29 recommendations to the provincial government to protect the lives and improve the working conditions of BC farmworkers.

The government has yet to respond.

Sinclair also noted that in a five-year period, inspection reports by the WCB decreased by 30 percent, compliance orders by 20 percent and the number of penalties imposed by WCB decreased by 54 percent.

Last year 160 workers died from a work-related accident or disease, including:

- 12 workers between the ages of 15 and 24;
- 22 forestry workers and 39 construction workers;
- 61 workers who died from occupational disease; and
- 4,723 workers were permanently injured as a result of a workplace accident.

The Federation's Occupational Health and Safety Committee members were in Victoria to meet with MLAs and press the case, not only for improved safety standards and enforcement, but also restoration of compensation rights for injured workers, that were stripped in 2003.

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