

PSAC National Health & Safety Conference – 2004

Conference Background Paper

The PSAC has a vital interest in protecting the health and safety of its members. The gains and advances we made in health and safety have come, in very large part, from grass roots workplace activism.

Whether at the collective bargaining table or during legislative changes, our members want their Union to promote and protect their health and safety. Over the next few years, our activism should focus on the following priorities:

Globalization

Our members want more power to act but many factors can impact on our ability to mobilize our members. Amongst them, 'globalization' should be a concern for every health and safety activist.

The term 'globalization' captures a number of corporate and governmental activities that are designed to provide corporations with unfettered rights superseding any other national, human or environmental rights. The sole objective of globalization is to realize unlimited profits. By definition, these rules decrease the power of governments to enforce their own rules and laws.

Trade agreements jeopardize workers' rights and our ability to protect the environment. Issues such as gender and racial equality as well as ensuring developing countries are treated fairly are not considered a priority.

Current and planned trade agreements are designed to erode these rights. Many believe that the negative impacts of corporate globalization are by design not by omission.

Trade agreements in effect today undermine national sovereignty, promote the privatization of government services and their delivery, and allow corporations the right to undermine the legislative and regulatory power of government. The privileged few believe that government regulations and laws cannot interfere with their ability to make a profit. Globalization jeopardizes many government policy including issues as important as health, safety, the environment, and the protection of our natural resources.

Given that globalization has come about at least in part as a result of the expansion and consolidation of corporations, it will require collective action from

a global perspective. As union activists we need to mobilize to advance the economic, political and social interests of citizens around the globe.

The PSAC has a direct responsibility to represent our members and negotiate good collective agreements. Our fight against globalization defends the employment and job security of a great many PSAC members. We also have a social responsibility to fight for a better society in which we can all live. Our fight against corporate globalization protects and defends public services for all Canadians, including PSAC members.

Our concerns as health and safety activists include:

- The protection of our health and safety rights won by the tears and blood of our sisters and brothers;
- Ongoing corporate and governments' assaults against health, safety and workers' compensation, designed to abolish or erode workers' rights and standards, and to nullify the laws, regulations, and workplace practices which are the core of workplace health and safety;
- The gradual decline of government's enforcement of health, safety and environmental legislation by the territorial, provincial and federal governments;
- The potential impact on the environment in light of the Kyoto Protocol recently endorsed by Canada;
- International trade agreements that limits our ability to protect the environment;
- The real threat to our universal public health services;
- Ensuring the availability of affordable medicines to fight diseases.

The globalization priority recognizes our union's responsibility to fight to improve the workplace rights and working conditions of our members, and acknowledges our role in fighting to improve the society in which we live.

Furthermore, the PSAC has made the establishment of a Social Justice Fund a high priority to assist in creating an environment where trade unions can represent their members and work to ensure a better standard of living, health and safety laws and equity without reprisal.

Putting Health and Safety Issues at the Core of all Union Business

We need to ensure that health and safety issues are mainstream issues for the Union and for the membership.

Health and safety issues have to become integral to each union activity, and activists must act strategically. As you untangle any health and safety issue, you find that they relate fundamentally to other issues like human rights, fighting racism, democracy and social justice. The most militant organizations work to make these connections even though they are often difficult.

Closer links need to be established with activists defending human rights and women's rights. Other links need to be further enhanced which includes environmentalists, public health-care proponents and community activists.

Important issues such as harassment and violence demonstrate how social issues find their way into our workplaces. Issues like "moral harassment" were part of recent amendments to the labour standards in Quebec. The federal government is drafting violence prevention regulations. Much work still remains.

Activists should make every effort to include health and safety topics and workshops at every Component conference and every PSAC conference including the Women's Conference and Access Conference. We need to ensure that health and safety is a priority in all our regions. Locals should ensure health and safety is a standing agenda item at every meeting.

As employers "re-organize" our work and the environment in which we perform it (i.e. Public Service Modernization Act), the power structure in our workplace shifts and often creates an increasingly stressful environment.

Health and safety knows no barriers. It is probably the most important right for every human being on our globe. Without our health and safety, no other right or gain can be truly enjoyed.

Ensuring that health and safety issues are connected to the work and decision-making processes at every level of our Union

The 2002 National Health and Safety Conference served as a launch pad for PSAC Health and Safety activists across Canada. Since then, our members have mobilized to promote health and safety issues within their Components and the PSAC. The Regional Health and Safety Conferences held in 2003 are also instrumental in refocusing our activism.

During the 2003 PSAC Convention, the delegates discussed a record number of health and safety resolutions. They approved increased funding for our conferences as well as allowing delegates at the National Health and Safety Conference to send health and safety resolutions directly to the PSAC Convention.

Our ability to send health and safety resolutions directly to the PSAC convention is an important link in shaping the future of our health and safety program.

Delegates also mandated the PSAC to launch a petition campaign to advance the issue of precautionary work cessation for all pregnant and nursing members.

We need to assess and better define the potential role that PSAC Regional Councils and their respective health and safety committees can play. They can play a key role in their regions in mobilizing the membership around health and safety issues.

We also have a rejuvenated National Board of Directors Standing Committee on Health, Safety and the Environment willing to promote health and safety and play a more active role in the various political forums within our Union.

Many believe that we need to establish a National Union Health and Safety Policy Committee to develop unified positions on health and safety issues. This idea needs to be openly discussed by our members.

Our National Conference should be used to articulate the PSAC Health and Safety Vision in key policy and program areas and must define a political agenda for subsequent debate at our PSAC Convention

Establishing and maintaining clear, two way communications with health and safety activists

The success of our program will greatly depend on our ability to communicate with our front-line members. At our last National Conference this recommendation was identified as a priority issue in both the workshops and the regional caucus.

There is a general consensus that we need to establish and maintain a health and safety network. Building a contact list for health and safety committee members would allow us to provide regular updates on current issues, bulletins and better respond to requests for information or assistance.

Communications between the various regions, the Components and the National Office is an important element in improving our ability to respond adequately to

our members on the wide range of issues health activists are confronted in their workplaces.

Special consideration must be made to connect with our membership in the North region and in our rural communities. Our task would not be completed until the same sense of belonging to our Union is found everywhere across Canada.

Ensuring that effective, Union orientated health and safety training is delivered to all Union health and safety activists

Knowledge is power. This is especially true when dealing with health and safety issues in the workplace. Health and safety has always been and remains a power issue in the workplace.

Not a day goes by without our Union having to fight to protect the health and safety of our members, or assist members in knowing and fighting for their workplace rights. We must have functioning Locals along with effective health and safety committees at the workplace level.

Our members demand more union health and safety training. Union training was also a key recommendation in all workshops during our 2002 National Health and Safety Conference.

The PSAC is supportive of joint employer/union training initiatives, but only if they respect our union principles that include our full participation from the planning stage up to the delivery of the material. Although joint training provides an interesting training opportunity, it is no substitute to union health and safety training.

We want to have the ability to train every PSAC members who sits on joint health and safety committee. Our members want to take control of the health and safety agenda in their workplace. Health and safety committees need to be driven by our union representatives.

It rests on the Union's ability to provide the membership with the tools, resources and education they need to defend their rights, and to make the Union strong.

Pushing for improved enforcement of health and safety legislation by the territorial, provincial and federal governments in our respective workplaces to provide and maintain a healthy and safe environment

The proper enforcement of health and safety laws is essential to safe and healthy workplaces. Our policies have to link and draw together the pursuit of workplace rights with the implementation of health and safety standards in the workplace.

Knowledgeable activists are better equipped to demand proper enforcement of health and safety laws. Our key role on the various legislative and regulatory committees provides us with the necessary expertise to lobby for better enforcement.

We must continue to demand that the territorial, provincial and federal government provide adequate resources to enforce the existing laws while maintaining the willingness to prosecute bad employers who repeatedly violate the law.

To this end, the PSAC supported the swift passage of Bill C-45, the so-called Westray Bill which made corporations and their managers more accountable for the safety of workers on the job. More than 800 Canadians die each year from work-related accidents.

We must make health and safety fines no longer tax-deductible for our corporate criminals. By using this tax loophole, major corporations can simply include health and safety fines as a normal cost of doing business and continue to ignore the carnage in our workplaces.

Our role also includes the promotion of national and international standards to improve and extend workers' health and safety protection.

We must continue to pressure territorial, provincial and federal governments which allow environmental degradation through deregulation, non-enforcement of regulations, or lack of regulations leading to such environmental crisis as tainted water in Walkerton and North Battleford.

Our legislative agenda also includes the promotion of a fully paid program for the protective reassignment of pregnant and breast-feeding workers and the inclusion of paid leave for union health and safety training for all workers.

Establishing collective bargaining strategies reflective of the experience of our health and safety activists to ensure that workplace health and safety issues are being addressed

Our Union's successes at the bargaining table, and our ability to negotiate improved wages and working conditions for all our members, regardless of where they live and work, is key to our ability to engage the membership, and ultimately, to build our Union.

Aided by a strong commitment on the part of the leadership at the National, Regional and Component level, our health and safety activists must work together to mobilize and fight for the inclusion of exemplary health and safety language in our collective bargaining.

Our goal should be to provide our members with collective bargaining language that enhances existing legislation and regulations in health, safety, workers' compensation and the environment.

To meet that objective we will need to:

- Develop model language ready to be tabled by our health and safety activists across Canada;
- Act strategically to develop effective communication networks;
- Develop tools for effective mobilization of our health and safety activists before each bargaining round;
- Organize bargaining activities with an emphasis on health and safety at the Local, Regional, Component and National levels.