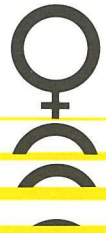


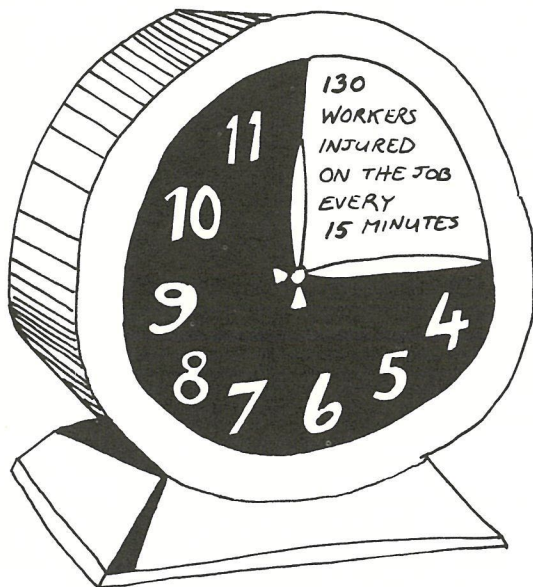
Equal Partners for Change: Women and Unions



Fit to Work: Health on the Job

Good health is not just the absence of disease. It is defined by the World Health Organization as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being."

Working women face many health and safety hazards which endanger their own health and that of their unborn children. As more women enter the work force, and more women enter non-traditional occupations, the risks to their health increase. Every 15 minutes, 130 workers are injured on the job. For every day lost to strikes and lockouts, six days are lost because of workplace accidents and disease. The costs in human suffering and financial losses are enormous.



As a direct result of working, women are exposed on a regular basis to physical, chemical, biological and psychological hazards to their health.

Physical hazards such as noise, vibration, extremes of temperature and radiation can cause accidents and disease: deafness from noise, bone and joint disease from vibration, collapse or coma from heat or cold and blood disease and genetic deformities in the fetus from radiation. In addition, physical hazards also cause increased psychological stress for the worker.

People working with plants, animals or groups of people face biological hazards. Diseases such as rabies or brucellosis can be transmitted by animals. Some

diseases such as brown lung or asbestosis are caused by plant dust, fibres or fungi. Contagious diseases are special risks for workers who are constantly exposed to large groups of people or to vaccines or laboratory work.

For workers in industry, chemicals pose a constant threat. Three thousand new chemicals are added every year to the hundreds of thousands already in use. Most have not been tested to determine the toxic affects on humans. Although workers may not show any immediate ill effects from using certain chemicals, the disease may show up ten or twenty years later, long after hundreds of other workers have been exposed.

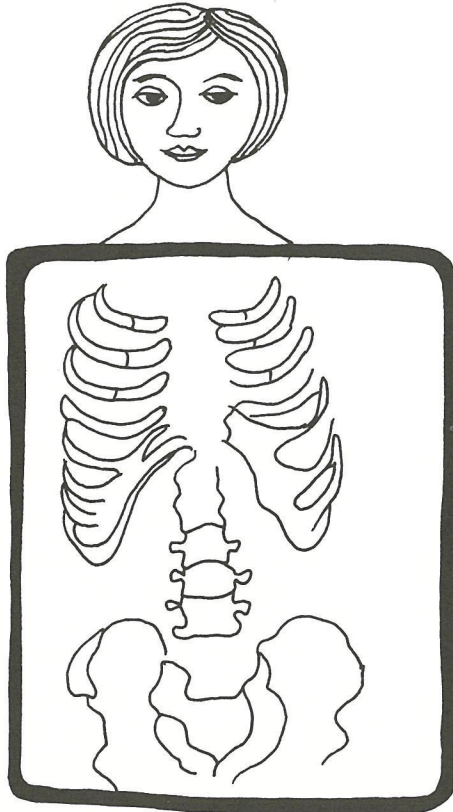
Women workers often suffer psychological stress because of the low-prestige, monotonous and unsatisfying work which they are limited to carrying out. Stress from these factors in addition to overwork or shift work, sexual harassment, production pressures, or noise and vibration can cause mental illness and physical symptoms. Psychological stress also makes workers more susceptible to other health hazards.

Some occupations dominated by women workers pose particular risks: airline attendants face jet-lag, stress and noise causing fatigue and alterations in the menstrual cycle. Dental workers and hospital workers are exposed to anaesthetic gases, X-rays and contagious





disease. Textile workers are in danger of cancer, brown lung or asbestosis from chemicals, cotton dust or asbestos fibres. Laundry and dry cleaning employees come in constant contact with dangerous chemicals causing diseases from skin rashes to cancer.



Pregnant workers face risks to their own health and to the health of the fetus. Miscarriage, birth defects, stillbirth and prematurity can be caused by workplace hazards. Because many substances can be inhaled, ingested or absorbed by the mother and passed on to the fetus, the risk to the unborn child can be very high, particularly in the first trimester of pregnancy when the mother may not realize she is pregnant. Anaesthetic gases, beryllium, carbon monoxide, carbon disulfide, estrogens and synthetic hormones and hydrocarbons pose a serious threat to pregnant women, and may harm the male reproductive system causing defects in their children.

The response of employers to the hazards facing pregnant women has been to refuse to hire or to fire women of child-bearing age working in areas of potential risk. One woman has been voluntarily sterilized so that she could continue to work in a battery plant using chemicals. However if health hazards are a danger to pregnant women, the workplace is not healthy for any worker. The answer is to cure the sick workplace, not to deny jobs to women workers.

Laws regulating health and safety differ from province to province, although some industries are covered by federal law. Some provinces now require joint employer-worker health and safety committees in all workplaces over a certain size. These committees are a good first step toward adequate health and safety protection but much more must be done to guarantee a healthy workplace. Laws across Canada must give workers the right to refuse to work in situations they feel may be unhealthy or dangerous. They must have the right to joint health and safety committees which have the power to make immediate and binding decisions. They must have the right to make tests, and receive reports on those tests or on medical or environmental information related to health and safety.

The best laws however, only guarantee a minimum of protection. Through collective bargaining, these laws can be improved on by health and safety clauses in new agreements.

For Discussion:

1. Evaluate your own job for health hazards. Are you exposed to dangerous chemicals, plant fibres or dusts, excessive noise, vibration, temperature or constant mental stress? What are the dangers in your workplace for female workers of child-bearing age?
2. A pregnant woman in your workplace is exposed to chemical hazards on the job. These chemicals could possibly harm her unborn child. The employer wants to lay her off but she has appealed to the union. What, if any, help would she get from your collective agreement? Is she protected by any provincial legislation? What is the ideal solution to this problem?
3. Is your workplace covered by provincial or federal health and safety laws? Does your contract or provincial law call for joint worker-employer health and safety committees? Are health and safety problems a major concern at the time of collective bargaining?