

Flag raising recognizes injured workers

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THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

About 1,000 people are killed on the job every year in Canada and those lives were recognized on Friday, the International Day of Mourning for workers injured or killed on the job, at city hall with a flag raising that was attended only by a handful of members of the city's injured workers support group.

"My first frustration here today is that there's no people that showed up for this very important event," said Teddy Bobrowski, a board member with the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group. "On average three people in Canada a day die on the job. That's a lot of death."

Every life lost is a tragedy, added Bobrowski, noting those individuals have families left behind and people expect to be safe while at work.

"They go to work to provide for their families," he said. "It's a necessary evil that we have to go to work. We can't survive in this world if we don't provide ourselves with a job and an income. It's just something we need to do."

When people are injured on the job and are unable to go back to work, there are supposed to be support systems in place but the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group

says the provincial government, specifically the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), is turning a blind eye to injured workers and their grievances.

Bobrowski knows the system from firsthand experience. He was injured at work 33 years ago and inevitably went back to work despite his injury in order to keep providing for his family.

He ended up losing his home and his business anyways.

"I lost everything that I had," he said. "I ended up psychologically impaired, suicidal, homeless and I just see that today this is still going on. What happened to me 33 years ago is not gone away and it's not better. It's actually gotten worse."

Steve Mantis, treasurer for the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group, said Friday is an important day not only to mourn those who have been lost but also to prevent future tragedies.

"We're the people who have experienced that injury and how it has negatively affected our lives and we've really committed ourselves to helping those that are going through similar experiences, but also, with the goal of preventing it from happening to others," he said. "We've experienced the hardship, the pain, the suffering, the loss and we know it's not a good thing. We want to prevent that from happening to others."

Mantis said they have expressed their concerns whenever able to the provincial government but it doesn't seem to be a priority, noting that the number of fines and enforcement on workplace health and safety violations has dropped 90 per cent over the last four years.

"Almost no one is now held responsible," he said. "It's like we don't matter, like workers are not important to our government."

The Thunder Bay injured workers support group secretary Jules Tupker said the WSIB system was designed for employers to pay for injured workers if they were hurt or killed in the workplace so they wouldn't be a burden on the public health-care system.

"What's happened now is the compensation system isn't paying for anything or very little for them so the only alternative to survive for health-care, for food, for everything else is to access our public health-care system and our public social services," he said. "It's a huge cost to the public system."

Despite no one attending the flag raising on Friday, Bobrowski said the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Support Group is very active and they will bring the awareness needed.

"We're bringing the storm to the WSIB," he said.