

1st Injured Workers Day fosters recognition

Plans underway to bring 'concept of workers compensation back to collective liability'

BY DOUG DIACZUK
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After fighting for more than 40 years, injured workers in Ontario finally feel like they are starting to receive the recognition they deserve, but there is still much more work that needs to be done.

June 1 will mark the first official Injured Workers Day in Ontario after an act in Bill 118 to proclaim the day was passed at Queen's Park last December.

Ahead of the day, the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Association hosted a flag raising ceremony at Thunder Bay City Hall on Friday.

"Injured workers have been fighting for a fair and just compensation system for many years," said Eugene Lefrancois, president of the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers Association.

"The government has finally recognized that workers killed, injured and made ill at the workplace deserve to be recognized and remembered in an official manner."

Lefrancois said other groups in the province did not have to wait 41 years to receive the same recognition as injured workers.

"We're an expenditure," he said. "We are an enemy of business. First rule of business, get rid of all your liability. I'm a liability."

Lise Vaugois of the Ontario NDP, who was recently re-elected in the Thunder Bay-Superior North riding, said the proclamation of Injured Workers Day was the result of advocacy by injured workers for many years, as well as Sudbury MPP Jamie West and Willy Nollies, past president of Ontario Network of Injured Workers Groups who passed away last year.



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A flag-raising ceremony was held at Thunder Bay City Hall ahead of the first official Injured Workers Day.

"It was really important and an important moment to get all-party support for this," Vaugois said. "Unfortunately, the way the government is functioning right now is not supporting workers and certainly not supporting injured workers."

Vaugois said there is still a fight ahead to ensure injured workers and people with disabilities are supported respectfully and able to live with dignity in the province.

"What we are seeing right now is more and more ways money that it is supposed to be going to support people is going back into corporate pockets," she said.

In order to fight back against these practices, Vaugois is working on a private members bill with injured worker's support groups that will rewrite the Work Safety Insurance Act.

"It would bring the concept of workers' compensation back to collective liability, which it is not right now. It used to be," she said.

"But because they built in this so-called experience ratings, then employers have a motivation to repress claims because if they don't have any claims they are going to get more money back after-

wards. We want to change that. We want to bring that back to collective liability." Vaugois said she expects the bill to be introduced and debated next fall.

For Lefrancois and other injured workers, the proclamation of Injured Workers Day is a step in the right direction, and he is hoping to build on the forward momentum.

"We are certainly going to try to get some traction on this," he said. "Because now we're legitimate. We are somebody. That's not a very good thing to say, but maybe we will get something."