Workplace deaths soar in Canada

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An average of five workers died each workday in Canada last year from accidents and job-related disease, reports a study published earlier this month. This represents an increase of 18 percent over 2004 and an alarming 45 percent increase over the level in 1993.

This carnage, which saw 1,097 workers killed in job-related activity in 2005, is an indictment of Canada's workplace-safety record. But what makes it all the more damning is that Canada's workplace fatality rate is among the highest in the industrialized world.

The 119 page report, entitled "Five Deaths a Day: Workplace Fatalities in Canada, 1993-2005," was prepared by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS), a government-funded group, that in this study drew on statistics compiled by the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (AWCBC).

The CSLS study shows that fatalities caused by both accident and disease have increased over the period of the survey at a rate dramatically higher than in any comparable country. However, the greatest increase has been in deaths from disease.

In seeking to explain their troubling findings, the authors examine a number of changes that have taken place over the past period in Canada and with particular comparison to the US. Aside from differences in how statistics are calculated, the report identifies a number of contributing factors, but some important questions are simply passed over.

The report shows that there was a 25 percent increase in the number of deaths attributed to accidents between 1996 and 2005, but the number of work-related fatalities due to disease increased by a dramatic 174 percent in the same period.

The most important factor identified in the study as contributing to the spike in disease-related workplace deaths was "exposure to harmful substances or environments" and most particularly asbestos. In absolute numbers, these account for 41 percent of workplace fatalities but almost 80 percent of the rise in overall deaths.

The study highlights the growth in fatalities related to asbestos production and use. While the use of asbestos in Canada declined by more than 75 percent between 1998 and 2003, the country remains one of the world's largest producers of this dangerous substance. More than 100,000 deaths a year worldwide result from asbestos use, and this number is expected to continue growing.

The authors suggest that an aging workforce within which death from disease becomes more prevalent may in part account for the increase in workplace fatalities from disease. In addition, they cite the possibility that changes in eligibility for disease-related compensation and increased awareness of this coverage may partially explain the rise in disease-related workplace fatalities.

The significant increase in deaths due to accidents on the job is in large part attributed to the growth of employment in resource industries such as fishing, mining, and forestry, which have among the highest fatality rates of any industry.

In addition to an evaluation by industry, the CSLS report gives figures for the most dangerous occupations. These show that trades, transport and equipment operators have the highest fatality rates, with 408.6 deaths per year on average between 1996 and 2004.

The report shows that between 1976 and 1995, there was a shift from more dangerous work to safer work with the growth of service sector jobs—a trend that has since reversed, with an accompanying increase in job fatalities.

Of the 29 OECD countries, Canada ranked fifth in the number of workplace deaths per 100,000 workers in 2003, surpassed only by Portugal, Mexico, Turkey and Korea. Of these four, only Portugal and Korea, both of

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which have a per capita GDP less than half that of Canada, are even considered "developed" countries by the OECD.

Canada is one of only eight OECD countries to include death from occupational disease in its workplace fatality statistics. This is only one of many discrepancies in the way states measure workplace deaths. Nevertheless, the report shows that even taking such matters into account, Canada has seen a growth in workplace fatalities where comparable countries have seen a decrease.

The report, however, is silent on the broader trends that lie behind the increase in Canada's workplace fatalities.

While not easily quantifiable, the drive for increased productivity that has been aggressively pursued by Canadian industry doubtless has played a crucial part in climbing workplace fatalities. Citing the threat of foreign competition, business in Canada, as throughout the capitalist world, has pushed for the elimination of many workplace rules.

Also not touched on in this report is the general increase in work hours and the added fatigue and stress that accompany the lengthening of the workday and workweek. A 2003 Public Health Agency of Canada report found that the country ranked fourth in the world in the number of hours worked per capita per year. In 2001, one in four Canadians reported working more than 50 hours per week, whereas in 1991 just one in ten had worked in excess of 50 hours per week.

The data used in the CSLS survey is based only on "accepted" worker-compensation claims, meaning that it probably seriously underestimates both accidental and disease-related fatalities. Even the report's authors concede that "injuries or illnesses which result in death many years after the incident or exposure are likely underreported."

The report also notes in passing that its data does not include work-related injuries or illnesses for workers who are not covered by provincial workers' compensation plans, a group that could represent as many as 20 per cent of all workers. Each provincial workers' compensation board defines whom it covers differently, but, in general, those not covered include the growing category of "self-employed" workers, military personnel, and most agricultural workers.

The CSLS report deals at length with differences in how fatalities are counted between the provinces, which administer workers' compensation, and the discrepancies that arise from a patchwork of access to occupational health and safety services across Canada. That there is no national standard or administrative body for workers' compensation is a problem long identified by the labor movement, but one that is not dealt with in the report.

Earlier this year, a conference was held by the Canadian Compensation Unions, an organization that represents 10,000 workers who, as employees of the various provincial compensation boards, deliver services to injured workers. The conference called for sweeping reforms to Canada's various workers' compensation programs, which it said are "failing to adequately provide for the needs of Canada's injured workers."

Alongside the increase in workplace deaths, the CSLS report notes a drop in job-related injuries as calculated by claims for Canada's workers' compensation boards—something for which it offers no explanation other than speculation about "definitional changes."

Critics of the existing system point to a recent trend by employers, who are not required by law to provide workers' compensation coverage, to opt out of government compensation coverage in favor of private insurance. Private insurers are typically far more restrictive in granting claims.

The authors conclude with the words, "Canada can do much better"—undoubtedly true, but begging the question, why hasn't it?

That such a situation persists in one of the most advanced economies in the world is a damning indictment of the existing social order. That daily deaths of workers go largely unreported except in publications of this sort and that they continue to be treated as routine demonstrate an attitude towards the working class at the highest levels of government and industry that is nothing short of criminal.

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