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Workplace deaths hit 26-year high

Critics blame grim tally on cutting corners during boom

By Renata D'Aliesio, Calgary Herald March 1, 2009

Alberta's once-roaring economy claimed the lives of an increasing number of workers in 2008, pushing job-related deaths to their highest level in 26 years.

Provincial government statistics show 166 Albertans died because of their job last year, up eight per cent from 154 in 2007.

The tally turns more grim when compared to two years ago. Work-related fatalities have risen a staggering 34 per cent since 2006, despite a provincewide campaign to drive down on-the-job deaths.

Employment and Immigration Minister Hector Goudreau attributes the spike to Alberta's now-wilted boom, noting the province had, for the first time, more than two million workers in 2008--many of them young and inexperienced.

"We put more trucks on the roads. We put more people on the roads. We have more people working," Goudreau said. "We're working with individuals that maybe might not have the same smartness about them, not necessarily their educational background, but experiences."

Still, the employment minister contends Alberta is overall a safer place to work today than in the past, noting the disabling injury rate and lost-time claims--two measures that account for job injuries -- have been decreasing, although 2008's figures won't be available until April.

Union leader Gil McGowan said the province's steep rise in occupational deaths is disturbing, but not surprising.

The Alberta Federation of Labour president believes the province didn't do enough to prepare for the boom's anticipated safety problems.

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McGowan said the province should have poured a lot more resources into investigating employers, enforcing safety rules and educating workers.

"We were living through an unprecedented economic boom and, during boom times, too often employers look for corners to cut in order to get the jobs done quickly and cheaply, and unfortunately one of the first corners to be cut is often workplace health and safety," McGowan charged.

"These fatality numbers are the result."

Aside from extra resources, the union is lobbying the province to make committees focused on health and safety mandatory at larger workplaces, as is the case in other provinces. McGowan said these committees would act as watchdogs, ensuring safety is a priority of employers and employees.

"The chances that health and safety get put on the back burner are reduced," McGowan suggested.

Vaughn Webb, who nearly lost his life when he was jolted by a power line in March 2003, thinks improved safety education for workers and their bosses is key to preventing Albertans from getting hurt. He also wants the provincial government to help smaller companies that may not have the financial means to deliver ongoing training.

"We need constant education, not just a one-time thing," Webb said.

Webb had an inkling the task that placed him in a wheelchair six years ago was unsafe, and today wishes he had pressed his boss on the matter and refused the job.

Then 26 and making \$11 an hour at a Pincher Creek welding and machining company, Webb was asked to install a sign on an archway. He questioned whether the archway was far enough from a power line, but his boss assured him the job was safe and even climbed up to help him at one point.

Webb was almost finished the installation when the three-metre rod in his hands touched the high-voltage power line, shocking him and knocking him nine metres to the ground. Nearly three-quarters of his body was badly burned and his left arm and leg had to be amputated.

"It changed my life forever. I can't run after my kids. I can't play with them the way I did," Webb said, who shares his story at safety conferences and in schools.

Webb suggests the threat of jail time would motivate employers to improve safety. His employer was never charged.

While penalties against Alberta employers involved in occupational fatalities reached more than \$5 million in 2008, no employers have ever been jailed for their role in a death.

A detailed analysis of Alberta's 2008 workplace fatalities isn't yet available. Occupational diseases account for the largest chunk of last year's total, nearly 40 per cent of all deaths, but 2008's rise is largely due to more fatalities on work sites and on the road.

Don Melnychuk, a consulting psychologist who specializes in fatigue and stress management, suspects many of Alberta's occupational deaths and injuries can be traced to employees working long hours on little sleep.

He doesn't doubt Alberta's overheated economy, and shortage of workers, drove many people to work beyond their limits and contributed to the stark increase in occupational deaths since 2006.

"When people are pushed, their recovery rates are shorter. You're being asked to do more," said Melnychuk, who advises companies on developing fatigue management plans.

"That has to be one of the reasons for that spike, on top of the intensity and the amount of work being done as well."

The construction sector accounts for many of Alberta's work-related fatalities and injuries.

Gary Wagar, executive director of the Alberta Construction Safety Association, said the nature of construction jobs, often handling heavy machinery and working high above the ground, makes the industry riskier than others.

Still, he said the organization is working to improve safety, recently introducing a safe driving course for workers.

Wagar dismisses McGowan's claim employers cut corners during the boom.

"Most employers will do everything they can to provide their employees with a safe work site," he said.

He noted of the roughly 18 construction-linked occupational deaths last year, six were older workers who died of heart attacks on the job.

"That relates to how busy the industry was and the age of some of the people coming back into the industry," Wagar said.

"Some of the retired people who came back weren't in good shape."