

Statements by Ministers

It is fine to change the Canada Labour Code and give workers the right to refuse unsafe work, which is a notion we support, but at the same time if workers do not have access to information about unsafe chemicals, if they do not have access to information about hazards on the job, then they are not in a position to make a valued judgment about their own right to refuse work.

Of course we would stand and join with the Government in mourning the loss of thousands of lives. We saw recently in Sudbury a very tragic mine accident. More recently in the Province of Quebec a near tragic mine accident, certainly tragic for one family. In my own community of Hamilton, Mr. Speaker, in the steel mills, a month or a couple of months do not go by when we do not hear of some tragedy which results in a near fatal or in some cases a fatal situation. It is something that we all want to work toward eliminating, but in order to do that we must have information.

I think the responsibility lies with the Government to support and enhance the facilities and resources of the Canada Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, not to cut them or reduce them in a way which really makes a mockery of the words that "we are all working together". We are all working together, but the one centre that was launched in order to get information out to workers to prevent the billions of dollars of occupational losses to which the Minister referred has been cut back. He will note in the Estimates that the cost per inquiry in 1986-87 is predicted to be \$71 per inquiry. That seems a very small price to pay to eliminate some of the billions of dollars that we lose in terms of productivity, not to mention the human costs in lives and injury.

I would encourage the Minister as a real tribute to this day of mourning, which was evoked by the Canadian Labour Congress, as a result of the Supplementary Estimates, to go back and to find the extra money not only to restore the Canada Centre for Occupational Health and Safety to its previous budget but also to enhance it. If he is really serious about trying to prevent or to cut down on these occupational accidents which cost workers' lives, money and productivity, then I would ask the Minister to go back to the Estimates, to rethink this very serious cut and to reconsider what has been a dream of tripartite participation among Government, management and labour to help make the workplace a safer place for every worker. I think then the very flowery, erudite and eloquent statements he makes today would have some meaning.

Mr. John R. Rodriguez (Nickel Belt): Mr. Speaker, at the start let me congratulate the Minister and thank him for having sent a copy of the statement to me well in advance. I received it last evening. I have been able to study it and am able to respond appropriately. I commend him for that practice and I trust it will infect his colleagues in the Cabinet, those who intend to make statements in the future.

We in the New Democratic Party caucus applaud the action of the Canadian Labour Congress in establishing April 28 as a commemorative day, in a formal sense to remember those brothers and sisters who were killed, injured or disabled on the job over the last year.

I think it is fair to say, Mr. Speaker, that we are today far more conscious of safety and health in the workplace than we ever were before. Yet in 1985, 768 Canadians were killed on the job and thousands have been injured or disabled. I am constantly exposed to the rhetoric from the Government in this House with respect to the great contribution that capital has made in developing Canada. We constantly bow down and worship at the altar of Bay Street about investments and money. To listen to what is sometimes emanating from the other side, we hear that that is God, that that is what has created a vibrant Canadian economy. In fact, too often we forget that labour has contributed more in building this great country of ours, oftentimes at the cost of lives and health.

Today we pause to remember them. In remembering, we recommit ourselves to being ever conscious of a safe and healthy work environment.

The Minister says that Part IV of the Canada Labour Code is important. He talked about the great things he has implemented, but since this Government came into office in 1984 there have been no amendments to Part IV of the Canada Labour Code. No Bill has been put before this Parliament in the name of the Minister of Labour (Mr. Cadieux) with respect to strengthening and improving the occupational health and safety sections of the Canada Labour Code.

As a matter of fact, in the federal Public Service and Crown corporations, for example, there were 13 fatalities in 1986-87 and 25,371 injuries, of which 16,536 were disabling. The federal Government has a long way to go indeed in cleaning up its act in the workplace. It seems to me that the Government has a responsibility to show leadership when it comes to the question of occupational health and safety.

One of the most dangerous occupations in this country, even more so than mining is fishing. We know that the Minister has had in his possession since January the Gray report, which is an interim report on health and safety in the fishing industry on the West Coast. We are still waiting for the studies to be undertaken on the East Coast with respect to the fisheries there. The Government would be well advised to move with a bit more alacrity. Rather than the speed of a snail, we would expect the speed of Superman when dealing with what obviously has been recognized as a serious problem, according to the Minister's statement today.

● (1130)

In closing, it is our sincerest hope that on April 28, 1988, we can stand in this place and say at this hour that the workplaces of Canada are safer and healthier than they were in 1987.