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Spreading the Word: Workplace Safety

Risk is defined as a situation involving exposure to danger. Every year, hundreds of youth are injured or killed on the job. Both the employee and the employer have rights and responsibilities for creating a safe and healthy workplace to prevent these tragedies at work. In order to abolish this issue, there are three fundamental rights as an employee that must be acknowledged. These are the right to know, the right to participate and the right to refuse unsafe work. Following these rights can lead to an overall safer working environment in all different fields of work.

All employees have a right to know what hazards present themselves on the job, and how these hazards can affect them. Health and safety training and on-the-job instruction are common ways to make employees aware of their surroundings at work. Educating people about chemical safety through WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) is a vital part of the “right to know” system. Ontario’s Ministry of Labour has developed the Integrated Health and Safety Strategy, which was put in place to prevent injuries and improve the delivery of workplace health and safety. It does this by supporting small businesses with new resources to keep workers safe, ensuring all workers receive the help they need, making the delivery of health and safety services more effective and efficient, introducing mandatory health and safety training for workers and supervisors and introducing weekend and after-hour inspections.

In addition to the right to know about the hazards at a workplace, employees also have the right to participate in health and safety activities. For employees/ employers to carry out their

significant prevention responsibilities, comprehensive training that provides the knowledge and skills to identify, assess and control, or eliminate hazards in the workplace should be mandatory. Perhaps more worker health and safety representatives should be required by law in workplaces, instead of just one person per every 5 – 20 people. The right to participate ensures that workers are involved in the identification and resolution of workplace health and safety concerns. Employees must ensure that their employer provides them with adequate information, instruction and supervision to protect their health and safety. Employees should be encouraged to make recommendations to their employers about ways to resolve health and safety concerns. Participating in investigations of work refusals, critical injuries and fatalities can also help to improve workplace safety.

The third fundamental right of the employee is the right to refuse unsafe work. A section in the Ontario Health and Safety Act is dedicated to ensure workers that if they believe that any equipment or workplace condition is likely to endanger their own, or another person's health and safety they have the right to refuse it. Workers must always ensure that they receive proper training to operate certain equipment or work in specific conditions in order to stay safe at their workplace. To refuse unsafe work, a worker must be taught how to properly ensure that all equipment, material, and protective devices are maintained and are in good working order. Employees must also receive training to ensure the safety of the people they work with. Young employees may not be aware that they have the right to have a voice about their workplace health and safety through their joint health and safety committee. This committee works to identify hazards and recommend measures to eliminate or prevent hazardous exposures. There are a series of steps to be followed in the process of refusing unsafe work. The first step is to immediately report the unsafe work to their supervisor. From there, it is up to the workplace to

follow through with the rest of the work refusal process. Workers should also be aware that they must have reasonable grounds to base their refusal off of. Meaning, they must have some kind of objective basis for their refusal. New employees should also know that they can voice their opinion without being penalized for it. It is against the law for an employer to punish a worker for refusing work they believe to be unsafe.

Overall, workplaces can be made safer through proper education and training on both the employer's and the employee's behalf. Following the three fundamental workers' rights could help to prevent workplace tragedies amongst young people all over Canada; it would help to ensure that more young people live to fulfill their dreams by knowing their risks and rights on the job.

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