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Introduction

Good evening. My name is Les Ellsworth. I have 19 years seniority with Inco Limited. During that time, I have spent 10 years in the Refinery and 9 years as the Union Co-Chair for Safety, Health & Environment.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Review Committee for providing this forum to make our views known. United Steelworkers of America, Local 6166, represents over 1200 members in Thompson, Manitoba. Our members work mainly in the mining industry, as miners, operators, trades people, technicians, security guards and in janitorial services. In addition, we also represent the baggage handlers at the local airport. Our members are employed in extremely diverse workplaces and, as such, we have a strong interest in occupational Safety, Health & Environment.

There are a number of presentations that will be made by my colleagues this evening and I will be making one on our concern for Occupational Diseases in the workplace, which is not covered under the Worker's Compensation Act.

OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE

Workers who fall ill, as a result of exposure to workplace contaminants or are diagnosed with diseases that shorten their lifespan, are faced with the difficult task of proving their illnesses are work related. The latency period of some occupational diseases can take years and even decades to develop.

Our Union has been at the forefront in the area of health, safety and the environment in the province of Manitoba. We are proud of the fact our workplaces are becoming safer and safer. Our attention is now focused on the effects of occupational disease on workers.

We have seen many of our members, and in some cases their families, suffer from different types of cancers, silicosis, asthma and other work related illnesses. It seems these diseases are on the rise each year, which explains the latency periods. I have had to attend hospital and private homes over the years and watch our brothers and sisters

slowly fade away as they succumb to cancers. There is a high rate of asthma in our community as well, in particular, our children. Our members hire on with a company to make an honest living, not to find out after 15 to 20 years of employment they have an occupational disease that will possibly take their lives before they even have an opportunity to retire. In some cases, where this has happened, families are left with very little income to survive on. For example, we lost 53 members to fatalities here at Inco, but we have lost hundreds of members to different diseases over the years.

The WCB requires proof the workplace has been the dominant cause of their illnesses before they will accept responsibility for occupational diseases. We recommend the dominant cause requirement be taken out of the Workers Compensation Board policies.

We believe the WCB Act should be changed to reflect the current legislation in place for Firefighters (Chapter W200-Part 1-section 4(5.1)).

We also believe the WCB should create an Occupational Disease Panel to research and establish a schedule of occupational diseases, not unlike what is in the British Columbia WCB Act.

Other workplace illnesses, such as stress, have to be reviewed in the WCB Act. We are finding more and more members going off work because of stress related issues. The environment our members work in today is dramatically changed to what it was 10 years ago. Our members are expected to do more with less, because of downsizing, early retirements, technology changes, shift work (we used to have an 8 hour shift, but since 1996, this changed dramatically. We now have extended shifts that can go anywhere from 8 hours to 12 hours. Our members should be entitled to the WCB benefits, if there is medical evidence to support it, but not in its present policy form.

We recommend the current definition of stress be changed from an acute reaction to a traumatic event for the reasons I have just mentioned.

Closing Remarks

If history is indeed the great teacher, then the concerns and issues we bring to the WCB should not come as a surprise to anyone here tonight. Recent history has taught us since the WCB Act was changed in 1991, injured workers have suffered greatly at the hands of the WCB. Workers in Manitoba deserve to have a compensation system that works for them. It must meet injured workers needs, following an injury or occupational disease, so they and their families do not have to worry about or experience financial hardship.

The system, fully paid for by employers, must be available to all workers when they need it, where they need it and without complications. I thought it was the workers compensation board, but then, maybe, I was mistaken!!!

I hope this presentation was not in vain and the review panel will bring forward recommendations for change to the government to ensure we have a fair system in place for everyone who has the misfortune of becoming injured in Manitoba workplaces.

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