The Workers Compensation Act

Legislative Review 2025-2026

March 2026

My father died on May 7, 1973. He was a farmer in a small town north of Winnipeg but like many farmers, he worked at another job to make ends meet. The family had pre-Medicare bills that would now shock the average Canadian who doesn't remember a time before our universal public health care system. The job he found was at the Bristol Aerospace Rockwood propellant plant near Winnipeg which operated as a major military and space manufacturer. The site, which opened in 1963, became a critical supplier of rocket systems and solid propellant and it was one of these projects that my father worked on. Due to its secluded location (for security…and certainly fewer prying regulatory eyes), the plant's operations during this era included the disposal of chemicals and solvents. I don't keep up with what's happening there now, but what I do know is that a number of the men working on the same project as my father became ill. However, his years of poor health combined with what was presumably a workplace exposure led to a series of health issues for my father resulting in his eventual death from peritonitis.

My mother was told by doctors at the time that they believed he was probably poisoned at work, but they weren't prepared to go on the record and fight with the WCB on the issue. I was too young to be involved in any discussions with the doctors but I do know that my family received no compensation. The issue faded into the background as so many workplace injuries have throughout the years and the day-to-day business of grieving and getting on continued.

I have no intention of litigating his claim or rights. But I'm also not in the business of forgiving and forgetting. Instead, I'm using my father's death as an example of what an overlooked and "unseen" workplace accident does to a family. My mother was left a widow, on a struggling farm, with no income or compensation and a young girl to raise on her own. My family, including my older brother and sister, was changed forever. And that's in a workplace that was, presumably, covered by the benefits of a workers compensation system. But…that was the 1970's and surely things have changed and worker safety and security has improved since then.

Not so much.

Or at least not so much for some workers.

My concern now is for the workers in this province who fall outside the protection and potential benefits of the WCB system – workers whose injury still may simply not be seen or acknowledged despite the very real consequences, like my father's. As one example, I have seen and grown increasingly concerned about the constant exposure to dangerous chemicals and workplace hazards that the people, mainly young racialized women, working at my nail salon cope with all day every day. Their coverage? Nil. Not unless their employer chooses to invest in "optional coverage" – a euphemism if ever there was one.

I have never personally filed a WCB claim but, generally speaking, my impression of the WCB's no-fault model that provides workplace injury and disability insurance is favourable. Despite what seems to be a bureaucratic and somewhat cumbersome process, most claims are probably dealt with more or less fairly. Exceptions no doubt occur. And I'm sure your committee will hear about those cases. In any event, I don't think this committee need concern itself with everyday case management but rather recommending a vision for the next ten years of work.

Since the last legislative review ten years ago, the Canadian workforce has undergone a significant transformation characterized by rapid digitization, concentrated remote work, immigration-driven and immigration-dependent sectoral growth, increased workforce participation rates for racialized groups, and an aging population. Women's participation continued to increase. In many sectors, the state and future of work is in flux. Debate focuses on the difficulties of balancing high employment rates with concerns over low productivity and a widening skills gap. Many of these workers, perhaps a majority of new workers, do not enjoy the protections of a union. It's not difficult to think that in this scenario, retrenchment and conservatism in employment and workplace law could be a comfortable backstop – for governments, for employers, and even possibly for the committee. I urge you – Be better. Do better.

My purpose with the example I cited isn't to single out the nail services industry, though the dangers seem obvious to me. Rather, it is to single out the dangers of a system that is "almost universal" – unless the workers compensation system actually is universal, workers who are among the most vulnerable will inevitably pay the price. As Michael Werier said in the report of the last legislative review, “Coverage is a fundamental issue in the workers compensation system.” Those are words to keep in mind for your own legislative review.

I had the opportunity to read the consultation paper that will help to frame your discussions. In particular, the highlighted mandate struck me:

…to ensure the Act remains aligned with the foundational principles of workers compensation…and to evaluate how effective the workers compensation system is in meeting the needs of Manitoba’s evolving economy and workforce.

For many Manitobans, work is precarious. Manitoba’s economy and workforce are evolving. While Manitoba has one of the higher unionization rates in Canada, those rates are falling and in any case, only just over a third of Manitoba workers have any kind of union coverage making it an imperfect worker protection vehicle. With a recommendation to move towards a truly universal system of WCB coverage, no single employer or industry can claim to be “singled out” as a bad actor. No employee, like my father, will fall through the cracks of a system where doctors or others have the onus to speak up for their care and coverage. Workers and their families can leave for their place of employment – no matter where it is – knowing that should the unthinkable happen, they will have somewhere to turn for help. Just think about what a remarkable legacy a system of truly universal coverage could be for this committee. My father would thank you.

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Private citizen