

Let's make the workplace a safe place to work

Karen Bilodeau

Columns & Analysis | Sunday, May 12, 2013

Workers, union officials and state representatives gathered at the Franco-American Heritage Center on April 28, just before Workers' Memorial Day, to honor those who died on the job in Maine this year.

It is important to gather and reflect on the tragedies workers have suffered as a result of their work activities, but it is equally important for businesses to step up to the plate to ensure that workers do not have to risk losing their lives as a result of their work.

It is disconcerting to realize that, during the past year, 23 Maine workers lost their lives as a result of their job activities.

Those individuals were varying ages, both genders, and hailed from every corner of the state. That number is just those who died as a result of their work activities – there are many other individuals who were seriously injured on the job this year who will suffer with permanent injuries for the rest of their lives.

Given the extent of understanding about the importance of workplace safety, it is remarkable and upsetting that job-place risks continue to occur and subject workers to danger any given day at work.

The people in Maine who died in the workplace this year (and every year) are neighbors. They are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters and friends. When they left for work, they may have kissed their loved ones goodbye. They may have made plans to meet with friends after work. Whatever they had done, however they said goodbye, they certainly did not intend to say goodbye forever.

Life is precious. Workers should be protected. That is why we need to increase safety standards at workplaces. Our unions have been fighting for these standards for decades now. However, we will not achieve full workplace safety on the backs of union workers alone.

We all, including businesses, need to ensure we have safer work environments. Whether that means more frequent machinery checks, compliance with safety standards, or better protection for our first responders, businesses need to ensure their workers are provided a safe environment with safe working conditions.

We should be concerned about businesses fighting against reasonable regulations. While they reference the need for greater profits to boost the economy, one only has to look to the recent fertilizer factory explosion in Texas to remind us of what happens when regulations are loosened and government oversight is not sufficient.

Just because the Occupational Safety and Health Administration last inspected the Texas factory in 1985 does not mean that the factory could simply disregard safety standards. Rather, it should have continued to ensure that its workers were protected, both for the business' long term viability, but also in consideration of its workers.

Those businesses that do consider workplace safety a priority should be recognized and celebrated. I understand it may cost a little more, may require a little more time and a little more effort to make a workplace safer, but in the long term, it is worth it – not just for the employees but for the viability of business as well as the community as a whole.

I have worked with many injured clients who have had their lives permanently altered due to something that happened at work. I have also represented family members whose spouse or parent lost their lives as a result of their work activity. Just as we saw the devastated family members of the workers who died in Texas, when Maine workers die on the job, it also causes great grief in the community.

For the sake of the 23 workers in Maine who died this past year, we should all take a moment to think about them and the families they left behind. They lost their lives doing nothing more than going to work.

And let's make a real effort to reduce that number for this coming year.

Please, for the sake of all Maine workers, let's all make workplace safety a real priority.

Karen Bilodeau is an attorney and shareholder at the law firm, McTeague Higbee. She is a resident of Auburn.