



HEALTH AND SAFETY **FACT SHEET**

Overwork

What are the problems?

Overwork is a growing health and safety hazard for CUPE members that are closely related to organizational changes in our workplaces. A simple definition of overwork is too many duties and responsibilities for one worker, with too few hours in the day to complete all that is required. It also includes fewer workers doing the same amount of work previously done by more workers.

Some or all of the following characterizes overwork:

- Working long and difficult hours.
- Unreasonable work demands.
- Multi-tasking and multi-skilling.
- Pressured/bullied to work overtime (paid and unpaid).
- Fewer rest breaks, days off, holidays and vacation.
- Faster, more pressured work pace.
- Performance monitoring.
- Unrealistic management expectations.
- Additional, often inappropriate, tasks piled on top of "core" duties (e.g., doing more than one job).

What are the causes?

Overwork is a consequence of changes in work organization. Specifically, cutbacks, privatization, downsizing and

their effects all contribute to overwork. Employer schemes to micro-manage workplaces, using total quality management (TQM) techniques, continuous improvement systems, and quality circles are all designed to re-organize CUPE workplaces.

With overwork, control is taken from workers and placed squarely and completely with employers.

The causes of overwork include:

- Conflicting demands from employers.
- Insufficient training, guidance and support from employers.
- Too many additional responsibilities.
- Worker isolation and lack of contact with co-workers.
- Downloading of management responsibilities onto workers.
- No replacement of workers who are away sick or on holidays.
- Lower worker to client ratios and staff cutbacks.
- Changed public perceptions (about public sector efficiency)
- Staff not being replaced upon retirement.
- Ineffective joint health and safety committees.
- Budgetary cutbacks.
- Restructuring and mergers.

- Too much of a team concept at work (TQM, etc.).Lack of modern equipment.
- Contracting out and privatization.
- More casual workers rather than full-time workers.
- Loss of control over how the job is done.
- Missing breaks and working through lunches.
- Workers feeling incompetent if they can't finish tasks on time.
- Management surveillance, e.g., closed circuit cameras.
- Greater levels of care needed by patients and residents.

Who is affected?

CUPE jobs have been under attack for years. There isn't a public service sector where CUPE members' work that has *not* been affected by cutbacks or subsequent overwork problems.

Prior to CUPE's 8th National Health and Safety Conference, a pre-conference survey of delegates was conducted. More than three-quarters (76.2%) of the 147 delegates surveyed said that they feel their personal health and safety to be at risk because of their workload. Overwork is clearly a health and safety problem that affects CUPE members in all sectors.

What are the hazards?

Overwork affects the physical and psychological health of CUPE members. But it does more than this when the effects spill out of the workplace and negatively affect members' family lives. The cumulative effects of overwork can be devastating.

Major outcomes of overwork can be grouped under the following headings:

- Stress.
- Burnout (including exhaustion and fatigue).
- Musculoskeletal injuries.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Family conflict.
- Gastrointestinal disorders.
- Increased exposure to health and safety hazards such as noise, temperature extremes and hazardous substances.
- *Karoshi* (death from overwork).

Identify the problem

A first step is to recognize that overwork is a health and safety hazard in your workplace. If the negative health outcomes mentioned above are affecting your members, overwork is likely a significant contributor. Surveys and mapping techniques are excellent tools to identify overwork hazards in your workplace. A survey can be done in co-operation with the employer, in which case the union approves the survey and is involved in collecting and assessing the information generated by the survey. The union should conduct its own overwork survey if the employer resists the idea or denies that overwork is a problem.

Body mapping, hazard mapping and your world mapping techniques can be used, either instead of or in addition to surveys, to identify overwork hazards.

Actions

Overwork hazards are largely centred on issues of control and work organization. Taking action on overwork therefore

involves members exercising their own control at work.

The following actions can help combat overwork:

- Take your breaks.
- Refuse unsafe overwork conditions.
- Report overwork hazards on health and safety reporting forms.
- Put overwork issues on the agenda for joint health and safety committee meetings.

Strategies for change

In addition to the action mentioned above, members should use strategies aimed to control overwork. Adopting an overwork policy is a good starting point. A policy would start from the premise that overwork is an occupational health and safety hazard, and that all steps possible should be taken to prevent the hazard, preserving the health and safety of workers.

Work also needs to be reorganized. CUPE must press employers to provide fair and reasonable workloads and safe paces of work. Safe staffing levels, for example, need to be established. Overwork can be – and has been – addressed through collective bargaining. Any collective agreement language on overwork should have prevention at its core. Language should be regarded as the base minimum that will be done to prevent injuries from overwork, including provisions for the joint health and safety committee to investigate overwork and make recommendations for improvements. As well, language should define some limits on workers'

job descriptions, to avoid overwork conditions.

Overwork legislation is needed and should include:

- Recognition that overwork is a health and safety hazard.
- Prohibitions on overwork, ensuring that overwork is not tolerated.
- The right for joint occupational health and safety committees to investigate and resolve overwork related health and safety complaints.
- The right to refuse work in situations where overwork compromises a worker's or another person's health and safety.
- Provisions on maximum levels of overtime and safe staffing ratios.

Overwork should also be targeted through compensation claims. Claims should be filed for any illnesses or "accidents" that have an overwork component. This will help bring overwork into the realm of compensation.

CUPE has numerous initiatives underway to combat overwork. What is vital to future actions and success on overwork is membership participation. Overwork is a deeply rooted health and safety hazard that is tied to work organization. Its effects are felt in many different ways. This fact sheet provides some information to address the hazard. More detailed information is presented in the CUPE health and safety guideline *Enough overwork: taking action on workload*.

For more information contact:

CUPE National Health and Safety Branch

1375 St-Laurent Boulevard

OTTAWA, ON K1G 0Z7

Tel: (613) 237-1590

Fax: (613) 237-5508

Email: health_safety@cupe.ca

www.cupe.ca

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Updated November 2007

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