



Workers' Memorial Day, an International Trade Union Movement

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzjhsp.v2i1.9779>

Each year on the 28th of April, trade unions around the world observe Workers' Memorial Day to commemorate those who have been killed or injured by their work.

Workers' Memorial Day is also a call to action to continue fighting to implement, protect and improve the laws, regulations and systems that keep workplaces safe and healthy.

Unions globally will be holding events, launching campaigns, and organising activities under the banner of "mourn for the dead, fight for the living".

The 28th of April is also the ILO's 'World Day for Safety and Health at Work'. The ILO uses this day to raise awareness of the importance of occupational health and safety and the important role of trade unions in labour inspection and the promotion of safe and healthy working conditions. It's no coincidence that the ILO picked up the trade union day of commemoration to make its international call to action.

The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions – Te Kauae Kaimahi (NZCTU) has previously outlined in this journal the critical role trade unions play in occupational health and safety, and how this is enshrined in health and safety frameworks internationally. Trade unions represent workers, both through worker engagement, participation, and representation mechanisms in workplaces, and, through tripartite engagement and oversight at the national and industry levels.

The History of Workers' Memorial Day

The origins of Workers' Memorial Day can be traced back to the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), which established a Day of Mourning in 1983 to recognise workers who had lost their lives because of unsafe practices at work.

Inspired while watching a passing funeral procession for a fallen firefighter, and the respect that was bestowed upon a worker who lost their life on the job, CUPE official Colin Lambert, and his close friend Ray Sentes of the Alberta Federation of Labour, considered how other workers could receive similarly deserved appreciation.¹

Their campaign led to the adoption of a resolution at the CUPE National Convention in 1983. The adopted resolution called for "a day of recognition each year for those who have suffered death or disability as a result of their work".²

The date 28 April was chosen to reflect the date when Canada's comprehensive Workers' Compensation legislation was passed through the legislature in 1914.

One year later, at the 1984 Canadian Labour Congress convention, the wider Canadian union movement adopted the resolution submitted by the CUPE officials, recommending the creation of a Remembrance Day for workers killed or injured on the job.

In 1991 the Canadian Federal Government passed the Workers Mourning Day Act, marking the 28th of April as an official day of mourning in the country.

Over the southern border in the United States, the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) recognised 'Workers' Memorial Day' in 1989. The AFL-CIO also used the 28th of April as it is the anniversary when the Occupational

¹ BC Labour Heritage Centre "Day of Mourning The Untold Story (2017) (21 April 2017) YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPOJvrXjmg0>>

² <https://cupe.ca/cupe-led-charge-establish-canadas-day-mourning>

Safety and Health Act of 1970 went into effect, and when the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was formed in 1971.

Scottish unions have formally recognised Workers' Memorial Day since 1993, the UK since 1999, Australia since 1996.

In Aotearoa, unions have been hosting and organising Workers' Memorial Day services since the mid 90's. In 1995 the Rail and Maritime Unions held a commemoration at the Port of Napier led by then NZCTU Vice - President Ross Wilson, while at the same time the Engineers' Union staged events in New Plymouth and Nelson.

Unions have also been involved in the establishment of memorials across the motu. Memorials have been established in Dunedin, Christchurch, Auckland and Palmerston North. In 2004 the Workers' Memorial Stone was unveiled on the Wellington waterfront outside of Te Papa. This is the site of the yearly Wellington Workers' Memorial Day service hosted by the NZCTU (of which readers are welcomed to attend).

The impact of work on lives

The ILO estimates that globally, nearly three million workers die each year because of work-related accidents and diseases (ILO, 2023).

In Aotearoa, between 50-70 workers are killed on the job each year – an average of one death per week. A further 700-900 workers are killed each year by occupational diseases such as cancers and pulmonary and heart diseases.

In addition, tens of thousands of Kiwis are seriously injured at work every year. In 2022 (the latest publicly available data) WorkSafe calculated that there were 35,805 injuries that required more than a week off work (WorkSafe NZ, 2023 NB this data collecting has been paused, presumably due to ongoing capacity constraints at WorkSafe)

Workers' Memorial Day is an occasion to recognise these people who have been killed and injured because of their work in Aotearoa, to raise public and political awareness of this problem, and to renew trade unions' commitment to improve occupational health and safety.

Workers Memorial Day 2025

The international theme for 2025 is the ongoing effort to recognise occupational health and safety as a fundamental right at work. This is in reference to the ILO occupational health and safety conventions C155 and C187, which the ILO recognises as 'fundamental conventions'. These are conventions that are recognised as universally applicable and are of utmost importance for all members of the ILO to adopt.

Notably New Zealand has still not ratified C187 (the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention). The NZCTU will therefore be using Workers' Memorial Day as an opportunity to reiterate to government the importance of confirming its international commitment to occupational health and safety by ratifying this convention.

This year there is also an explicit focus on the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and digitisation in health and safety. AI is proving to be a useful tool in many contexts but also introduces significant health and safety risks for workers. These risks include the intensification of work, unfair or intrusive monitoring and surveillance which can significantly impact on both mental and physical wellbeing (O'Neill, 2025). Constant monitoring through wearable tech can increase work-stress and negatively impact productivity (Adams-Prassl, 2019).

Ensuring that AI benefits workers, and that the health and safety risks associated with its use are eliminated or safely managed requires strong worker voice. Trade unions therefore have an important role to play to make sure workers are benefiting from the use of AI and are not harmed by it.

Workers' Memorial Day 2025 is well timed. The government's recent announcements on health and safety demonstrates its lack of ambition in addressing New Zealand's poor health and safety performance. Minister van Velden has announced that certain small businesses will be carved out from essential health and safety duties; she has also signalled an intention to stretch WorkSafe's resources even thinner with the introduction of a road cone tipline. These announcements suggest that the current government is basing its approach to occupational health and safety on ideology, not evidence.

The complete lack of action to ban engineered stone and protect workers from the harm of silica dust in spite of the mounting evidence of its harm to worker health, further reiterates the mammoth task of getting decisive action in New Zealand to address our appalling record and incidence of occupational diseases and ill-health.

Health and safety professionals, business representatives, academics, and unions all provided the Government with a widespread consensus on what was needed to drive positive change and improve the country's poor health and safety track record.³ Unfortunately It appears that this consensus has been ignored.

That's why the union movement will once again be out for Workers' Memorial Day on 28 April 2025 to remember the dead, and fight like hell for the living.

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