

REPORT on the ITF INTERNATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY CONFERENCE

December 12 & 13, 2011
San Francisco, USA

Attended by:

Serge Champoux, National Union Representative – Health and Safety
Lisa Peterson, Motorized Letter Carrier, Winnipeg Local

CUPW sent two delegates to this international conference on health and safety, sponsored by the International Federation of Transport (ITF) in conjunction with the American chapter of the Transport Workers Union (TWU). CUPW has been affiliated with the ITF since 2007. The two-day conference was held in San Francisco (USA). As a result of Canada Post's opting for greater motorization of its activities, CUPW and its members are increasingly facing transportation-related health and safety problems. This conference



would help CUPW obtain information and expertise, particularly on two specific issues on the conference agenda: workplace violence and fatigue. I was accompanied at this conference by Sister Lisa Peterson, a motorized letter carrier from Winnipeg. Sister Peterson has experience and expertise on the working conditions of CUPW members doing this work.

The conference brought together academic researchers and trade unions active in transport occupational health and safety with a view to coordinating the potential international trade union research program,

setting guidelines for joint research, facilitating the link between theoretical research and practical workplace improvements through collective bargaining and proposals for legislation, activating work of the ITF Road Transport Section Health and Safety working group and preparing the program of its activities.

The ITF held its last health and safety conference in London, England, 15 years ago, in 1996.

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Monday, December 12

Some 50 or so participants, 16 of whom coming from almost every other continent, took part in the conference. Several large national and international unions were represented: the TWU, *Unite*, the *Teamsters*, the Belgian, Bulgarian and Australian transport workers federations, and the CAW.

Most transport jobs were represented: cab drivers from Washington, line haul drivers from London, Bulgaria and South Africa, bus drivers from Australia, Sweden, England and the USA, municipal employees from Norway, as well as aeronautical workers. Also attending were university researchers and officials from the US-based National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

Unfortunately, and to my great surprise, Lisa and I were there only representatives there from the postal sector, and Lisa was the only rank-and-file member from CUPW taking part in the conference. Most of the work was done in English, but simultaneous translation was provided.

The conference began with an opening speech by Brother Mac Uruta, who spoke about the ITF's "Fatigue Kills" campaign. He was followed by Brother Ed Watt, the TWU's health and safety representative, who provided an overview of the conference.

The first formal presentation was entitled *Research in Transport Workers' Health: International Partnerships from Past to Present*, and given by Dr. June M. Fisher, a 78-year old senior scientist at the Trauma Foundation, with more than 33 years of experience in the ITF and expertise in health and safety issues as they relate to bus drivers. She has been involved in several studies that have been conducted in this field since the late 60s and early 70s.



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Dr. Fisher spoke about the health issues faced by these workers, such as elevated blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease. The list of stressors found in the road transport sector in the 80s is similar in every respect to today's list: violence, traffic, road congestion, split shifts, atypical work schedules and frequent shift changes, lack of access to restroom facilities, inadequate rest or lunch breaks, and interaction with the public.

According to Dr. Fisher, even though technology has evolved considerably since the 1970s, clinical study results for these stressors show that the situation has worsened.

After the presentation, we went on to the following theme, *Health and Safety around the World*, where other participants presented reports on their unions and the health and safety work accomplished in their area. Presentations were made by:

- Unite (UK – 1.5 million members) representation of commercial and industrial road transport workers;
- Sister Sari Sarinen, from the Canadian Auto Workers (200,000 members);

- the Bulgarian Transport Workers' Federation (12,000 members);
- the Transport Workers Federation of Pretoria (South Africa), on HIV issues;
- the Brisbane Bus Drivers Association (Australia); and
- the Teamsters (USA, 1.4 million members).

Although all these presentations were interesting, they were not particularly relevant to the postal sector, except perhaps for Australia's, which dealt with the current involvement of former DuPont Corporation executives in bus transportation safety issues. Its presentation also dealt with DuPont's *Zero Harm* program, which focuses on blaming work place injuries on workers, while completely ignoring the employer's responsibility. The presenter also mentioned that, as part of the program, DuPont had implemented a practice of focussing on retraining injured employees. The company is also attempting to discredit the union by taking credit for health and safety success stories and blaming the Union for the company's failures.

Finally, it is using the program as a means of cutting the number of workdays lost as a result of workplace injuries instead of reducing the number of workplace accidents.

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Interestingly, there is a connection here with Canada Post: Nina Mankovitz, CPC cochair the NJHSC, used to work for DuPont. CUPW has also learned that other former employees of that company are now working for Canada Post.

The first day of the conference ended with a workshop that was facilitated by Dorothy Wigmore, an Occupational Health and Safety Specialist from Worksafe (a company from Oakland) who used to do training work for CUPW in the 90s. Her workshop involved a *body mapping* exercise.

In body mapping, participants are asked to identify areas of the body where they feel sore after a day of work by sticking colour-coded labels onto a front and side profile map of a human body drawn on chart paper. CUPW has been using this technique in its basic health and safety training for years. However, it became apparent to us that the technique was relatively unknown to many conference participants.



Tuesday, December 13

Having fallen behind schedule because of the many presentations on the previous day, we began the second day by discussing *Safe Wages: Economic Issues and Safety* with a member of the Australian Transport Workers' Federation. We then went on to listen to a presentation by an economist from Detroit's Wayne State University, who talked about the impact of economic forces on road transport safety.

Here again, despite the extremely interesting talks and material, the well-researched studies and statistics and the accurate overview of the health and safety situation of

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workers and passengers in the road transportation sector, there were relatively few similarities with the problems we faced as a public postal service union.

This was followed by a presentation from the US-based NIOSH, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. Its representative talked about current trends in transport workers' health. The trends show increased rates of high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and depression in the past several years, and illustrate the ravages of globalization and the results of maximizing profits at the expense of worker health and safety not only the United States, but around the world.

After the lunch break, Ed Watt, from TWU, made a presentation on its *Transit Rail Advisory Committee on Safety* (TRACS) and the *Confidential Close Call Reporting System* being used in the rail transport sector. A member of the Aviation Workers Union then talked about the *Aviation Safety Action Program* used in air transport, specifically at Southwest Airlines in the US. These systems allow workers to confidentially report incidents and accidents without fear of disciplinary reprisals by the employer.

This was followed by a plenary workshop entitled "Where do we go from here?," facilitated once again by Dorothy Wigmore. In this workshop, participants had to draw up lists of feasible health and safety goals, with targets and timelines, and prioritize strategies developed to meet them. Other subjects on the agenda were developing an action plan, obtaining help from natural allies and networking.



Realizing that we were still way behind schedule, the President of the ITF announced that a decision had been made to out-and-out cancel the portion of the conference scheduled that afternoon to deal with workplace violence. Although we tried telling them how important this issue was for CUPW members and that it was the main reason for our participation in the conference, we were unable to convince them to have any discussion of workplace violence.

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The last part of the conference dealt with *Strategic Planning on Health and Safety*, where Dr. June Fisher once again took the podium to stress the importance of the worker's role in health and safety, since workers are the ones who know their workplace and the problems it can present.

Finally, the President of the ITF closed the conference by highlighting the importance of organizing activities specifically related to health and safety and our particular workplaces, setting up outreach programs to help improve our working conditions, and cooperating internationally using the advanced technologies and means of communication at our disposal.

In solidarity,

Serge Champoux
National Union Representative
Health and Safety

Lisa Peterson
Motorized Letter Carrier
Winnipeg Local

Ottawa, December 21, 2011

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