

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

U.S. and Canada Observe Worker's Memorial Day

On April 28, 2003, union members from throughout the U.S. and Canada joined their counterparts from around the world in observance of Workers' Memorial Day to honor and remember the victims of workplace injury and death. Nearly 6,000 U.S. workers and over 850 Canadian workers were killed on the job in 2002, and over 50,000 more died of occupational illness and disease. Let us continue to honor their memory by exercising our democratic rights in the workplace, in our unions, and in the legislature to fight for workplace safety.

Each May, we traditionally join with family, friends and co-workers to nationally observe Memorial Day to honor and remember the soldiers who have fought and died in all the wars. The United States recently proclaimed an end of hostilities in the war with Iraq, and for this we are thankful. Hundreds of our soldiers, our finest men and women, our sons and daughters, have lost their lives this past year in Afghanistan and Iraq. Let us continue to honor their memory and sacrifice by exercising our democratic rights as free people in the two great democracies of North America.

We are all extremely grateful that the military conflict has been declared over, and that many of our soldiers may soon be coming home to the families, lives, and jobs they left behind in service to our nation. These brave servicemen and women deserve our gratitude and a hero's welcome upon their return, regardless of our personal positions either for, or against the war.

Many of those returning will now lay down the arms of war, and pick up the tools of their trade. They will exchange their military uniforms for the uniforms of their civilian vocations as craftsmen, builders, skilled tradesmen, healthcare workers, technicians, laborers, and countless other occupations in workplaces and unions throughout our nation.

They return home in peacetime, but will face many battles in the days and years ahead. They will now rejoin their co-workers in the ongoing battle for workplace safety, democracy and industrial justice. They will rejoin their unions and society, and take their rightful place in workplaces throughout the nation. And, unbelievably, they will return to a workplace where 6,000 of their fellow Americans lost their lives last year in on the job accidents. 6,000 fatalities is unacceptably high even in war, but this slaughter on the "shop floor" is hardly even noticed by our lawmakers or the mainstream media, especially in the shadow of war.

Where is the moral outrage against this continuing slaughter? How ironic is it that a worker who survives the risks and hazards of the battlefield will return home only to face the risks and hazards of the shop floor? How ironic is it that a worker called up by the National Guard to fulfill the manpower needs of war, can be cast out of work in the downsizing of manpower in the workplace? How ironic is it that those who fought to uphold the ideals of democracy can lose their jobs for simply exercising their democratic right to join or form a union? And how very

ironic is it that those who fought to liberate the citizens of foreign lands may soon lose their jobs to those very persons as U.S. corporations continue to accelerate the export of our homeland jobs to low-wage countries?

There is a different kind of war being waged in this country. It is a war against workers' rights and a war against unions. The right to strike has been striped from us by our government and the courts. Our labor laws and workplace safety laws are being diluted and attacked from every corner. Our right to organize the unorganized is challenged and frustrated by weak laws and strong corporations with anti-union animus. Our jobs and our livelihoods are being contracted out to the lowest bidder in a continuing assault on our financial security and our families' future. We, the BMWU, and every other union of the AFL-CIO and CLC, must confront these unprovoked attacks against working men and women. The middle class that builds and sustains the great democracies of North America is in jeopardy of extinction. The unions that nurture and sustain the middle class are under attack. In order to turn the tide, we must commit ourselves to organizing new members and growing and unifying our unions. We must join together politically to elect lawmakers who understand the hopes, aspirations, and needs of working people. We must individually put aside the pettiness that divides us, and focus on the issues which unite us. We must continue to speak out against injustice in the workplace and in society, and we must never give up or compromise our trade union ideals.

Unions, through the active participation and involvement of their members, are one of the great pillars of our U.S. and Canadian democracies. Organized labor does not exist for existence sake, but rather it exists as an effective and enduring advocate for workers' rights, and a vocal champion for social equality and justice. Unions, with the support and involvement of their members, have helped shape our democracies and strengthen our institutions.

The late, great, Senator Hubert Humphrey once observed, "The strength of the trade unions has given the workers of this country spirit and dignity.... But let's not forget one big fact. Workers are not just interested in labor and wages— they're interested in peace, leisure, health, and education. They're not just workers; they're the people who make up this country."

Yes, we are the people who make up this country, defend it with our lives, and keep it strong. And we must use the collective voice and collective political clout of our unions to ensure our elected lawmakers understand this simple and undeniable truth. We, the people, demand equity and fairness in the workplace and in society. We expect nothing more, and will settle for nothing less. We are not just union workers, we are the citizens who defend our country, build its armaments, and make the economic engine of our two great nations run.