

Activists of the highest order

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This issue recognizes Catherine Fenech, Local 528

What were you doing in the year 2000? While many workers were looking towards a new decade, OPSEU member Catherine Fenech was starting Repetitive Strain Awareness Day. Recognition of this day spread across Canada and internationally, and now every year on the last day of February workers, unions, and organizations call for action to address debilitating musculoskeletal and repetitive strain injuries (RSI). Catherine wanted just one day for everyone to focus on these injuries, so Feb 29 was decided upon, the only day of the year that is non-repetitive (on non-leap years, RSI Awareness Day is Feb 28). Since that day in 2000, Catherine has toiled on behalf of thousands of workers to raise awareness of RSIs. Yet in 2010, Catherine notes that Ontario still does not have a regulation to compel employers to take steps to prevent RSI injuries.

There is no doubt that repetitive strain injuries are hugely expensive...for everyone. Not only does the Ministry of Labour say that RSIs compose over 43 per cent of all approved workers' compensation claims, but MOL records indicate that between 2003 and 2007 Ontario workers missed a total of 2.5 million days of work due to RSIs, with direct costs of more than \$314 million. It is estimated that from 2003-2007, Ontario employers paid more than \$1 billion in direct and indirect costs related to these injuries. So why then does a lone worker have to spend her days and nights organizing events to inform the government and employers of something they already know?

Catherine Fenech would tell you that it is because not enough is done to prevent these injuries in Ontario. "Unfortunately, we have flawed rebate programs that encourage aggressive claims management by employers, and reward them for injuring workers, and then push the costs onto taxpayers," said Catherine in front of a crowd at CAW Hall on Feb. 28, 2010. "There is also the strong employer lobby that will vigorously fight any attempt to get ergonomic regulations. But another part of the problem is us. We don't want it enough. We aren't fighting hard enough. How do we expect the government to take this issue seriously when we don't? Where is the leadership on this issue? These are the largest category of workplace injuries but there is no concerted effort to deal with them."

Catherine also demands that labour make it a priority and dedicate resources and run campaigns to address this issue. Always a strong voice for injured workers, Catherine says, "Labour needs to include the injured worker community in this fight, as those who suffer from RSIs know better than anyone why we need to prevent it. We need to engage all our allies, particularly those in the research community and the medical community. We can't keep dealing with this in silos. We need to come together. We need to work together. Too many lives are being destroyed."

Catherine knows firsthand the devastation that these injuries cause; she is open about the fact that she has been living with RSI since 1994. She has struggled and continues to struggle with pain, with WSIB, with discrimination, with obtaining appropriate accommodation, and with the poverty that accompanies devastating injuries. Yet she still holds an active position on her local joint health and safety committee, lobbies the government, organizes RSI day, assists and participates in research projects, and appears as a guest speaker across Ontario to advocate for workers. Why does she do it all? It's simple. Catherine told everyone why at RSI Day 2010, "I don't want anyone to have to go through this. I know that many injured workers are much worse off than I am. Many lose their homes, their families, everything."

OPSEU is proud to call Catherine Fenech a member of Local 528, a member of her joint health and safety committee, a brave woman who speaks out about her experiences to save others from debilitating injuries, and a health and safety advocate of the very best order. Thanks to Catherine for advocating for others while facing injury herself. Thanks for being a beacon for injured workers everywhere. Thanks for helping to remind us that prevention and compensation are two pieces of the same puzzle.

To honour Catherine best, here are her own words to challenge us all. As always, never worrying about herself, but rather calling for action to end RSIs like she has done ever since 1994, Catherine asks all, "So what are we waiting for? RSI isn't new, it was first written about in the medical literature in 1713, almost 300 years ago. Even the term RSI, which is considered relatively new, is almost 30 years old. How many workers do you think have been injured since 1713? Every year we wait, the body count goes up. More than 35,000 will get injured next year according to the government. Who wants to be next? Who wants to volunteer? I'm already injured. Will it be you or you? Who do we want to sacrifice? Your husband or wife, or perhaps your son or your daughter? Who will it be? Unless we want to sacrifice another 35,000 workers, then now is the time to act. If not now, when? When there is no one left to injure?"