

**By Ken Peterson**  
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## Job Safety and Workers Memorial Day

Work should be less dangerous. Fewer people should die or be injured at work. That's why Canadian labor unions started the first Workers Memorial Day in 1985. They picked April 28 because it was the date Canada's first workers' compensation law was passed in 1914.

Recognizing the significance of what the Canadians had begun, U.S. unions marked April 28 as Workers Memorial Day in 1989. By historical coincidence, it is the same date federal OSHA opened its doors in 1971. Today, more than 20 countries recognize the day to remember those who have died

or been injured at work and to commit to the health and safety of today's workplaces.

In 1989, as the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry commissioner under Governor Rudy Perpich, I attended the first St. Paul Trades and Labor Federation Workers Memorial Day event in St. Paul. That year, to save budget dollars, some legislators were trying to do away with Minnesota OSHA (MNOSHA). The event's main speaker Steve Dress, then head of the federation, brought us to our feet by condemning those who would endanger workers' lives by cutting dollars meant to protect their safety and health.

Like 26 other states, Minnesota runs its own OSHA program, funded with both federal and state dollars. The program enforces safety and health standards and offers

advice about how to maintain safe, healthy workplaces. Thanks to leaders like Steve, MNOSHA's program wasn't eliminated then and still remains dedicated to protecting the safety and health of Minnesota's workers.

On average, Minnesota workplaces are safer today than in 1989. Although today's state workforce is almost one-third larger, both fatalities and workers' compensation claims dropped by about a third between 1989 and 2012.

In 1989, a worker's chance of getting hurt or sick on the job was 8.2 percent. In 2012, it dropped to 3.9 percent – less than half the odds in 1989.

Still, improvement in overall job safety doesn't mean much if you or a loved one is hurt because of sloppy safety practices or becomes ill due to exposure to hazardous materials.

Much of MNOSHA's work is aimed at reducing threats from such safety and health hazards. The most common citation for employers is not providing training under the "Right-to-Know" (handling hazardous materials) law. The third most common citation is failure to involve employees in the employer's required "A Workplace Accident and Injury Reduction" (AWAIR) program. When implemented, both Right-to-Know and AWAIR have been shown to reduce workplace injuries and illnesses.

Falls in construction are another big problem and focal

point for MNOSHA.

Nationally, 289 of 775 construction fatalities were due to falls in 2012.

In Minnesota, in 2012, six of 10 nontransportation construction fatalities were due to falls. Our agency is particularly concerned about smaller companies, those with fewer than 10 employees, which often experience a higher number of injuries and fatalities.

MNOSHA is joining with federal OSHA, the Minnesota Safety Council, and other employee and employer groups to promote the "2014 National Fall Prevention Safety Stand-down" during June 2 through 6, 2014, to raise awareness

about preventing fall hazards in construction.

During this week, MNOSHA encourages employers to stop work to talk about safety topics such as fall protection, ladder safety or proper scaffolding. View MNOSHA's Web page at [www.dli.mn.gov/osha/falls.asp](http://www.dli.mn.gov/osha/falls.asp) for information about how to participate.

The great 19th century labor organizer, Mary "Mother" Harris Jones, would tell audiences to "Mourn the dead and fight for the living." This Workers Memorial Day, all of us should remember those who have been killed or hurt on the job and focus on ways to reduce workplace deaths and injuries.



Lakehead Constructors Ryan Nelson is shown here with their 2013 LECET Safety Driven Award of Excellence as one of 39 contractors receiving safety recognition on March 21. Left to Right: John Kittleson – Bituminous Roadways Inc. (LECET Board member), Nelson, Martha Henriksson of AGC Minnesota (LECET Board Member), Mark Ryan – Carl Bolander & Sons Inc. (LECET Board member) and Dave Borst – Laborers Local 405 Business Manager (LECET Board member). (Photo by Dwight Engen, LECET Construction Marketing Director)

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