



Alberta Federation of Labour

SMOKING IN THE WORKPLACE

I. INTRODUCTION

It has long been established that smoking is bad for a person's health, causing a variety of cancers and other diseases. The health effects of smoking are not restricted just to the smoker – two thirds of the smoke is not inhaled by the smoker, but instead goes into the surrounding environment.

The growing awareness of the dangers of second-hand smoke has raised concern about exposure to smoke at the workplace. Smoking is an occupational health and safety issue. And as such, it is an issue of concern to the Alberta labour movement.

2. HEALTH EFFECTS

Tobacco smoke contains 4,000 chemicals, over 50 of which are known carcinogens (cause cancer). Some of these cancer-causing chemicals include benzene, formaldehyde, cadmium, nickel and lead. Other chemicals, such as tar, carbon monoxide and nicotine are known to cause a variety of other diseases. Some of the most dangerous of these chemicals have no odour or colour. In the case of smoke, it is what you can't see that will kill you.

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in Alberta, killing

3,400 people a year. Smoking leads to cancer, heart disease, stroke, impotence and many other illness and health problems. On average, smokers die 15 years sooner than non-smokers.

Its health effects are something that occurs over time. While smoking rates are dropping, diseases due to smoking are on the increase. This is because past smokers are only beginning to see the health effects today.

Contributing to the problem is the highly addictive nature of tobacco. It is considered one of the most addictive substances consumed by humans. People aware of its damaging effects find themselves unable to quit.

Second-Hand Smoke

While the negative effects of smoking are felt most seriously by long term smokers, in many ways non-smokers exposed to second-hand smoke (SHS) are more at risk. SHS contains twice the tar and nicotine, and five times the carbon monoxide, than the first-hand smoke inhaled by the smoker.

- Between 2,000 and 8,000 Canadians die each year due to exposure to SHS.
- Children are particularly vulnerable to SHS.

3. WORKPLACE EXPOSURE

Why should the Alberta Federation of Labour and its affiliates be concerned about smoking? Because many workers are exposed to tobacco smoke at their workplace, and therefore vulnerable to its damaging health consequences.

- Non-smoking workers in the food service industry have a 50% greater risk of cancer than other non-smokers.
- Restaurant and bar workers have 3 to 6 times more exposure to SHS than other workers.
- Smoking has been linked to higher rates of workplace accidents and injuries.

These workers have no choice but to inhale SHS during their workday. Their jobs put them at risk of cancer, heart and lung disease and other diseases. They are no different than workers exposed to asbestos or coal dust or other hazardous substances.

Alberta's labour movement has an obligation to fight to protect these workers. Just like any other occupational hazard, we need to find the right solutions to eliminate the hazard and keep workers safe.

4. ELIMINATING SECOND-HAND SMOKE

The labour movement has long believed the best way to fix a health and safety hazard is to eliminate it. It is not always easy to determine the best hazard control. We must use our collective

experience and research skills to find out how to best keep workers safe. What is the best method to control exposure to tobacco smoke?

Ventilation

Many argue the best way to reduce exposure is to install proper ventilation to circulate out the smoke. While ventilation can remove some smoke from the air, no ventilation system can successfully remove all smoke. Dangerous chemicals remain in the air at levels that most experts believe are hazardous.

Health Canada considers ventilation to be counterproductive as it can "delude non-smokers into a false sense of protection."

Limited Smoking Areas

Some workplaces limit smoking to only certain parts of a room or area. Usually these methods do not work for two reasons:

- If the areas are connected, smoke is not contained by partitions, signs or partial walls, especially if the areas share ventilation systems.
- Workers may be required to enter smoking areas as part of their duties.

Separate Ventilated Smoking Rooms

Some public spaces and larger workplaces use smoking rooms, with isolated ventilation, to contain smoking. For larger workplaces this can be an effective way to isolate exposure, but it is not without its problems.

- Some workers, such as cleaning or maintenance staff, will be required to enter these rooms.
- It is not a practical solution for smaller workplaces or restaurants and bars.
- Fugitive emissions from unsealed portions of the room (doors, joints, etc.) may still contaminate non-smoking areas.

Smoking Bans

Many employers and provincial governments have implemented policies banning smoking in the workplace. A ban prohibits smoking anywhere in a workplace, and sometimes in the immediate vicinity around the workplace (such as entrances).

Research on smoking shows that smoking bans are the most effective method to eliminate workplace exposure to tobacco smoke. Bans can be implemented by individual employers, by municipalities for workplaces in their jurisdiction, or across all workplaces by the provincial government.

Three provinces – Saskatchewan, Manitoba and New Brunswick – have implemented province-wide smoking bans in all workplaces. Ontario has committed to a province-wide ban in 2006. In Alberta, 67 municipalities have partial bans covering some or all workplaces that fall within municipal jurisdiction.

The Alberta government has only recently passed a partial ban, excluding bars and other “adult-only” facilities.

This limited ban has a minimal impact on workers most exposed to SHS.

5. SMOKING BANS AND WORKERS

Economic Effects

Dozens of studies in the past decade have found that smoking bans have no economic impact on employers. Sales and profit levels remain the same or increase. Many restaurants report an increase in sales following implementation of a smoking ban. Smoking bans are found to have greater economic advantage than regulations requiring ventilated smoking rooms, as the latter has significant renovation and capital costs.

Effects on Workers who Smoke

The labour movement cannot lose sight that many of our members smoke. Smoking is an addiction and a personal choice. Any policy should respect the right of a person to smoke if they choose and remain focused on eliminating workplace exposure to tobacco smoke. The employer should ensure a worker who chooses to smoke is not exposed to additional safety hazards (such as extreme weather conditions), or experiences harassment.

The most effective smoking policies also ensure adequate smoking cessation programs are in place and accessible to workers who wish to quit. Smoking cessation programs are proven to be effective at assisting people to stop smoking.

6. ALBERTA FEDERATION OF LABOUR POLICY ON SMOKING

The Alberta Federation of Labour sees the issue of workplace smoking as a health and safety issue. By applying our union principles to this issue, we are committed to a clear path of action. Any action taken by the AFL must respect two principles: eliminating exposure to tobacco smoke and protecting the rights of our members:

Eliminating Exposure

1. The Alberta Federation of Labour supports a province-wide workplace smoking ban that includes all workplaces, including restaurants and bars. The AFL will lobby the provincial government to implement a smoking ban.
2. In the absence of provincial legislation, the AFL encourages its affiliates to negotiate with their employers specific workplace smoking bans. The AFL will provide research and communications support for affiliates wishing to implement smoking policies.
3. The AFL will participate in coalitions that are working toward the restriction of smoking in workplaces and public spaces.
4. The AFL re-affirms its policy that all AFL events shall be smoke-free.

Protecting Workers

1. The AFL views tobacco as an addictive substance, and believes workers who wish to quit smoking should receive an appropriate level of support and assistance.
2. The AFL believes any smoking ban must be accompanied by smoking cessation programs available to workers affected.
3. The AFL will lobby the provincial government to expand smoking cessation programs and to ensure these programs are accessible to workers affected by any workplace smoking ban.
4. The AFL encourages affiliates to negotiate employer-paid smoking cessation programs for any employee who wishes to quit smoking. The AFL will provide research and communications support to any affiliate wishing to implement such policies.
5. The AFL will continue to respect the rights of workers who choose to continue smoking and will defend workers unfairly treated by the employer due to their decision to smoke, while at the same time ensuring other people are not exposed to second hand smoke.
6. The AFL re-affirms its ongoing support for Just Transition programs. Workers in the tobacco industry displaced due to changes in government policy regarding smoking deserve a Just Transition to allow them to move to other employment.

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