

Whistleblowers need protection!

Why we need to protect employees with the courage to speak out.

“WHISTLEBLOWING” – WHAT IS IT?

Whistleblowers are employees (frequently government employees) who protect the public interest by disclosing significant acts of waste, fraud, mismanagement, law-breaking or abuse of authority which threaten the public good.

Many whistleblowers are seen as heroes. Time's 2002 Persons of the Year were three women who took huge risks to blow the whistle on what went wrong at Enron, Worldcom, and the FBI.

But just as many have been fired, demoted, isolated or harassed at work. They may become victims of poisoned work environments. Work assignments may be withdrawn or reassigned for no good reason. They can be portrayed as whiners or problem employees.

Whistleblowers who have the courage to step forward need protection.

There can be no effective public interest unless the public has all the facts to make fully informed decisions.

BLOWING THE WHISTLE CAN WORK!

Nancy Olivieri, a medical scientist at Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital, was threatened with a lawsuit by pharmaceutical maker Apotex if she published data showing risks from an Apotex drug. Olivieri had agreed not to publish research without Apotex's consent.

The hospital, concerned about losing revenue from drug companies, demoted Olivieri. At a hearing before the College of Physicians and Surgeons Olivieri was fully exonerated.

Whistleblowers need to be protected in their work places. What if:

- Waste-water workers discover that raw sewage is being released into an aquatic environment?
- Hospital employees know that patient safety is compromised by cut-backs?

The public has a right to know about these situations. But we will find out only if employees are protected.

WHISTLEBLOWING & GOVERNMENT

We live in an information age. So why is it getting harder for the public to find out what our governments are up to ... especially when they engage in wrongdoing?

- freedom of information requests are delayed, government oversight offices closed, and watchdog groups sidelined
- concentration of media ownership means we no longer get balanced or complete news
- government cutbacks, deregulation and industry self-regulation means the public can no longer monitor the public's business
- Private companies are not subject to freedom of information requests.

To stay informed, the public needs whistleblowers in government and industry. And whistleblowers need protection in their collective agreements.

HOW CAN WE PROTECT AND ENCOURAGE WHISTLEBLOWERS?

Unions have led the way in ensuring equitable work places through harassment language, attention to diversity issues and other initiatives. CUPE already has a strong history of speaking out when government and employers do not act in the public interest. Now we must lead the way again in safeguarding the public interest through whistleblower protection.

Two of the best ways to protect whistleblowers:

- legislation preventing government and industry from silencing whistleblowers
- strong whistleblower protection in employee collective agreements, including "poisoned environment" language

- raising awareness about whistleblowing

We need to put whistleblowing on the public agenda and on the bargaining table.

This pamphlet co-produced by the Labour Environmental Alliance and the CUPE BC Environment Committee.

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