



A Call to End the Dilution of International Workers' Memorial Day

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzjhsp.v2i1.9722>

The clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the built environment that surrounds and comforts us all comes at a cost. But what cost is too high? The lives of workers around the globe are threatened by unsafe conditions on a daily basis, mostly silent to the majority who benefit from their actions yet screaming loud among the families and friends of those workers who pay that ultimate price. Approximately 2.93 million workers die every year as a result of work-related accidents and illnesses, and close to 400 million suffer from nonfatal workplace accidents (ILO, 2023).

International Workers' Memorial Day is the day set aside each year to remember those workers who have died seeking to provide for the families who are now left behind. The authors submit this reflective essay to highlight the continued dilution of this day's significance by global health and safety societies, professionals, and businesses, and to call for a stop to this dilution advocating for a return to the fundamental purpose of 28th April.

We have witnessed too often that 28 April is a reason to hold a celebration of achievement of a milestone, a workshop, or other promotional event in the name of health and safety. While we applaud such endeavors as they look to reduce the burden of occupational fatalities, injuries, and illnesses, we ask that societies and professionals stop using 28th April for such promotional events. Most countries have a Veterans Day and a Memorial Day for the unique purposes they provide. 28th April needs to be set aside for health and safety professionals to reflect deeply on why they do their work, on why they need to improve, on the injustices that still exist, and to memorialise those that have died at or from their work.

In 1991, the Canadian Parliament passed the Workers Mourning Day Act to "designate a day of mourning to remember workers killed, disabled or injured in the workplace and workers afflicted with industrial disease". The Act established that the 28th day of April shall be known under the name of Day of Mourning for Persons Killed or Injured in the Workplace (Government of Canada, 1991). Wigmore (2017) traced the idea of such a reflective day back to the mid-1980's. This is the history and significance of 28 April.

It is not and ought not to be known as the "World Day for Safety and Health at Work" (ILO, 2022). The ILO (2015) recognizes it as "as both a day for commemoration and celebration". We respectfully disagree.

Let's call 28th April what it truly is: "International Workers' Memorial Day". We applaud the editorial team of this journal for accurately naming 28th April. Let us remember the lives lost and the families impacted through death or life-altering injury and disease. Let us all remember our work colleagues across the globe and reflect on our shared future and resolve to fight 'like hell' for the living. 28th April should never be seen as a justification or self-promotion for professional qualification; IWMD must always be about remembering our failures which have resulted in lives being lost - and what we must do to ensure that we don't fail again. From the ILO (2022) website, "The annual World Day for Safety and Health at Work on 28th April promotes the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases globally. ILO's World Day for Safety and Health at Work 2022 focused on enhancing social dialogue towards a culture of safety and health, while the 2023 Day focused on OHS as a

fundamental right, and 2024 highlighted impacts of climate change on OHS. These are all important and all initiatives we support – but not on 28th April.

The annual fatalities recorded by the ILO attest to the failure of OHS legislation globally to achieve the objective of a safe world of work. Since the first national OSH acts were enacted in the 1970s over 100 million workers have died as a direct result of workplace conditions and incidents and unimaginable numbers injured, disabled or made sick. On 28th April we remember those workers and their families who grieve and suffer the consequences of unsafe processes and the lack of decent work.

28th April is not and ought not to be an international day for recruiting OSH professionals and practitioners as has been done and promoted in the past. It ought not to be a day of celebratory events; there are other times of the year where that might be appropriate. But on International Worker's Memorial Day (28th April) all of those who are in the OHS profession need to stand side by side with workers and their families and remember those who have died. It is a day of reflection and remembrance when we set aside our career objectives and mourn the loss of those who no longer have a career and give consolation to the families who have lost their breadwinners. It is a day to affirm that much more must be done to remove worker deaths and life altering injuries from our workplaces.

We absolutely object to attempts to rename and rebrand International Workers' Memorial Day because it diverts attention away from the tragedy that manifests itself over 7,000 times each day around the world, that rips life, health and well-being from workers, their families, and their communities. Tragedies that throw families into mourning and grief, that deprives children of parents, that deprives parents of their children, and which cripples and disables workers and families, often permanently. Ayers (2019) reminds us that when the life of someone in our community is taken at work or because of some work process, many other lives in that community are shattered; some may never be the same – others ruined beyond belief.

International Workers' Memorial Day allows us to remember the dead and in doing so it allows us to reflect on how and why our brothers and sisters have died. It is uncomfortable and for many it opens painful memories, and that is as it ought to be. We need to recall the tragedies of work, to remember those who have suffered most because of what happened to them and to reflect on what could have been.

Any attempt to rename International Workers' Memorial Day or use 28th April as a celebration of safety professionals merely detracts from that memory and the call to action that comes from reflection. Renaming substitutes uncomfortable and painful memories with an innocuous myth that the celebration of OHS and the profession is a better call to action, that the promotion of legislative compliance, which in many cases does indeed help – will consistently bring about better work conditions and prevent future fatalities and injuries. Whilst it may be a comfortable option, it fails to recall the horrors that millions of workers have experienced, nor challenge the status quo. Health and safety, its societies and its professionals, desperately need that reflection if it is to truly move forward in an ethical and moral manner the remaining 364 days of the year.

International Workers' Memorial Day is primarily a worker-led act of remembering. It challenges the status quo because it recalls that the failure of OHS is in the millions of dead and destroyed lives, rather than in abstract non-compliances with safety rules. It is a radical act because in grieving, we ask why workers had to die? The soft alternatives of international days for OSH are akin to giving bread to the hungry; acceptable because they do not question, because they do not challenge (Camara, 2009).

In her piece in the New Statesman O'Brien (2019) put it thus: "Gramsci once described the struggle for social justice as requiring 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'". However, as [Erik] Wright (2010) put it: "Today we need an optimism of the intellect as well." It could be argued that such intellect needs to be "work health safety intellect", founded upon

what Winchester (2023) described as data, information, knowledge and wisdom; especially wisdom if we are ever to achieve better work, health and safety outcomes. That optimism is at the core of International Workers' Memorial Day, every April 28th, as workers around the world take time to remember their colleagues who have died and affirm actions that work harder to assert the rights to a safe and healthy future for every worker.

On 28th April this year, and indeed in every year thereafter, workers throughout the world will stand side by side and proclaim that this is International Workers' Memorial Day; it is the day we remember our brothers and sisters whose lives have been stolen, and the families left behind. It is the day that we reflect and remember so that tomorrow and the day after, and the day after that our commitment to fight like hell for the living is revitalised and reinforced (Mother Jones, 2022).

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