



**Workers Memorial Day**  
**North Dakota State Capitol - April 28, 2007**  
**Rick Pfenning, President, Missouri Slope Central Labor Council**

Workers Memorial Day was conceived by organized labor to call attention to those killed and injured on the job. Although its observation began in the United States with the founding of the Occupational and Health Administration in 1970, it's not about them. We are here to call attention to a disaster. Not a media drenched catastrophe like the one in Virginia but a larger more dispersed disaster. The people we honor here today suffered a far less public fate, not a crashing wave of publicity, more like a pebble dropped in a pond, its effects rippling out to family, friends, and coworkers.

The events that led to the deaths represented by these flags and to the injuries of many more are little noticed, a short story on the evening news or a brief paragraph in the paper with no mention of cause or responsibility. Brief stories that are often little more than "man killed by fall" or "worker crushed by machine". No mention of conditions at the worksite, lack of training, pressure for production, or past workplace violations. Just another accident, the cost of progress, the cost of doing business. Many who die as a result of their work will be completely unnoticed outside of an obituary, having suffered lingering deaths from asbestosis, black lung or cancers from exposure to workplace carcinogens.

The fact is without a major catastrophe to focus the community's attention, workplace fatalities are nearly invisible. Reduced to costs that can be absorbed. A cost more easy to accept than the cost of inspections, regulation, and oversight. Companies face greater sanctions for breaking environmental or financial laws than acts resulting in the death of a worker. The killing of a worker through the willful violation of a safety law is a misdemeanor under OSHA regulations. The maximum sentence, six months in jail, is half the maximum for harassing wildlife on federal land. Willful violations resulting in fines are so rare a company is far more likely to win a state lottery. And if those costs are considered too high the jobs can be shipped overseas where workers die by the thousands to feed America's demand for cheap goods and high profit.

Last year at this time the nation was focused on the Sago mine disaster, the year before it was the Texas refinery fire, every year brings major accidents that briefly hold the country's attention and every year we gather here with more flags. Since the formation of OSHA and MSHA in the early 1970s, workplace fatalities had decreased dramatically, but over the last few years this progress has stalled and even reversed. A combination of regulatory rollbacks, reduced funding, and voluntary compliance favored over enforcement has reduced the effectiveness of these agencies, the results of which we mourn today. As obviously ineffective as this policy of neglect has been, this administration proposes in its 2007 budget the complete elimination of funding for OSHA worker safety and health training and would no doubt prefer to eliminate OSHA and MSHA altogether, allowing corporations to police themselves. But when corporations take over writing the rules from a purely economic viewpoint, not only do workers suffer but democracy does as well. Corporations are about profit they do not breath, feel loss, or suffer pain. Without government protection, unions become the final line of defense, organizing workers to fight for safe workplaces, and collectively bargain for contract language that protects workers where federal laws cannot.

This is meant to be a somber, respectful occasion. But also an occasion to strengthen our resolve to turn this trend of injury and loss for short term profit around. We cannot allow the US to become a low-wage country where safety is ignored and workers are disposable.

We can do better.

