

Health & safety: Noxious fumes from Queen's Park

Last month the Harris government passed Bill 57, a set of regressive amendments to some 30 different sections of the Occupational Health & Safety Act (OHSA), including diminishing the rights to know about hazards in the workplace and to refuse unsafe work. Bill 57 gutted the OHSA by downloading government responsibility for workplace health and safety to local systems, which lack enforcement mechanisms.



In light of Bill 57 and the health & safety problems members have been experiencing, YUFA proposes to:

- establish a Joint Health & Safety Committee with the employer to improve health & safety conditions
- guarantee the members of this committee the right to stop unsafe or hazardous work
- guarantee that members will not be penalized for refusing unsafe or unhealthy work.

YUFA conducted a series of focus groups on health & safety with faculty and librarians last year and included relevant questions in the 2001 bargaining survey. For the full report, see www.yufa.org/exec/index.html#issues. What follows is a summary of the top factors in the *physical* environment that members identified as reducing well-being.

Indoor air quality

The most prominent physical health issue is the cluster of poor indoor air quality (IAQ), inadequate ventilation, and temperature extremes. A disquieting 59 % of YUFA survey respondents were concerned about the air quality or temperature of their offices and classrooms.

The extent of IAQ problems at York was confirmed in a recent systematic survey of YUSA members, conducted by undergraduates Sharon Allen and Jenny Vlahos. A clear majority of YUSA members (61%) rated the air quality in their main work area as 'somewhat poor' or 'very poor'!

Many campus buildings were constructed during the 1970s energy crisis, when building codes called for

'tighter' buildings with reduced ventilation and increased insulation. Symptoms attributed to IAQ include eye, nose, throat and skin irritations, fatigue, headaches, and chronic respiratory ailments. Such symptoms, commonly reported in the YUSA study, are typical of Sick Building Syndrome.

Bad ergonomics

YUFA members told us of increasing rates of Repetitive Stress Injuries including back pain, eyestrain, and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. Access to computer work stations and office furniture based on ergonomic design principles varies dramatically among departments, and 34% of YUFA survey respondents indicated that their equipment was ergonomically inadequate.

Campus safety

Hazards for pedestrians include inadequate snow and ice removal, the lack of pathways in parking lots, and speeding vehicles on service roadways. The locations of most parking lots and their poor lighting make many feel unsafe at night: 31 % of all YUFA survey respondents, and 62 % of women respondents, noted this.

Moreover, many survey respondents working in Science and Fine Arts buildings — where hazardous materials are used routinely — doubted that materials were being handled safely.

Inadequate facilities for persons with disabilities

The bargaining survey and focus groups elicited grave examples of how York's buildings and facilities on campus discriminate against people with disabilities. Examples include front-opening doors, lack of ramps and elevators, and inadequately modified classrooms. The need to carry teaching and research materials between offices, classrooms, and parking lots can mean that YUFA members with physical disabilities are forced to pay for more expensive parking spaces.



Deteriorating infrastructure

Lack of funding has caused years of deferred maintenance, cutbacks to maintenance staff, and an 'utter degeneration of facilities' in some buildings. Members spoke of broken chairs, inadequate lighting, cockroach infestations, dead flies blown out through air vents into offices, and accumulations of dirt that have made some offices 'unlivable'. Many classrooms and communal areas have become unwelcoming and unsafe.



Chronic leaks in several rooms have permitted fungal contamination. Members who have been exposed to this report symptoms such as nausea, sinusitis, and burning eyes.

Funding cuts have also led to overcrowding, which hampers teaching, creates a chaotic work environment, and poses fire-safety risks. Most classrooms were not designed to accommodate increased class sizes — in Fine Arts, lectures have come to be conducted in studios where students must sit on the floor.

The substantial literature on the work environment suggests that these concerns need to be taken seriously. Studies indicate that most health problems associated with the physical environment result from chronic exposure to low-level stressors rather than sudden exposure to an acute hazard. Conditions generally must reach extremes before everyone is affected. Like flagging canaries in a coal mine, a few individuals suffering illness symptoms may indicate environmental stresses that may eventually compromise a larger population's health.



Finally, while this summary has enumerated key *physical* stressors in our workplace, social and psychological stresses in our workplace also affect our well-being. 27% of bargaining survey respondents agreed 'I am under a lot of stress at York', 18% that stress was harming their health.

A to Zzz ...

I am very concerned about the profound sense of **alienation** existing between faculty, students, staff and the administration at York. I believe we are experiencing a profound lack of leadership in our administration and a tremendous gulf exists between the faculty (and their understanding of the purposes, goals, and future of York) and the vision of the future being drawn by the Administration. (Lynne Angus, Arts)

Chemicals and **bacteria** released in heating and cooling. Asbestos. In addition, being in the wash-rooms is positively dangerous. (works in McLaughlin, Osgoode, Schulich)

There is a **chilly climate** for all equity groups in my department that no one is willing to address seriously. It wears out myself and my colleagues.

Deterioration at Glendon is everywhere evident (except on the grounds). Toilets and sinks leak; the 'drinking' water from fountains is largely unpotable; my office is much too hot all year round; my classrooms are filthy with chalk dust, litter, etc.; students have few places of beauty and sophistication to appreciate.

It needs to be stressed that being a cutting-edge research worker is quite simply **exhausting!** When the administration is SO weak and bad this negatively impacts one's ability to do almost anything as well as one can.

Cold and stuffy classroom; from time to time bizarre **fumes** affect the whole building. (Schulich)

My classroom had no air coming into it - we were **groggy** after two hours and had headaches. Formaldehyde from labs seeps into stairwells and elevators. Water spots on ceiling tile lead to mould. (Lumbers)

(Written beside item on stress:) **Heart attack** and bypass surgery.

We should have a greater commitment to **integrated pest management** to minimize hazards to people and organisms used in research.

I've had several bouts of Repetitive Strain Injury from **job-related computer use** (elbow, wrist, back, and shoulder) and the chairs, desks and keyboards on campus are extremely NON-ergonomic and aggravate these problems.

Very inadequate snow removal - especially in parking lots - quite dangerous for those with **knee/back/hip balance problems**.

Many rooms have no windows and the **lights** are fluorescent (flickering). This light and air quality exhausts students and they lose attention after an hour in a three hour class. (Centre for Fine Arts)

I find **mice droppings**. (Founders)

My main classroom is impossible to use with the door shut because of poor ventilation. Open, the **noise** from passersby is disturbing. (Schulich)

Organic chemistry labs deal with hazardous materials; safety is insufficient. (Petrie)

I have a recurring problem requiring crutches. There are never any handicapped **parking** spaces available - all filled, all with valid stickers. Once I could not meet a class because I could not walk that far.

Since you include mental stress in your health & safety list, I'd like to point out that there are no, or few, **quiet spots** at York where you can sit with a coffee or drink and read or talk quietly.

Cars **race** from the entrance to the ramp up to the parking lot across from Seneca - after several letters to the parking office, there were speed bumps added to the ramp. They were removed, pushed to the side, within hours of being placed there. Since our parking fees are continually going up, I don't see why conditions keep getting worse.

Personal **security** is of concern. Being told by my Associate Dean to have a cell phone at exams as a way of being safer - who pays for my cell phone? (Erin Hewitt, Atkinson)

Need more lights at night - campus is **too dark!**

There are still **unsafe** chairs, uncomfortable computer workstations, and very crowded room conditions at times. (Lumbers)

I don't have many health/safety concerns, but I recognize the **validity** of such concerns in others. (Bob Drummond, now Dean of Arts)

The **working culture** of York generates a collective stress for all of us. I experience this not as a simply 'personal' or "happening to me" thing. It creates a shared sense that, even as we try to assume our own level of responsibility, we pass on responsibilities to others that are stressful for them.

The fume **extractor** in CFT 104 does not seem to extract adequately. (Centre for Film and Theatre)

York Hall has only one small elevator, some stairs are crumbling.

Are rooms with Xeroxing machines properly ventilated? Especially later in the afternoon, the air is very poor of oxygen and students tend to **doze off**. (Ross)