

MEMBER UPDATE

After a year of pandemic pain, we gather again to mourn for workers

COVID-19 has brought increased risk to life and health

This year, changes are coming to the annual Day of Mourning for workers killed, injured or made ill on the job. That's because the COVID-19 pandemic has changed us, changed our workplaces and changed how we live.

It has also changed how we must mourn those who die, are injured or get sick at work.

Last year, we had to cancel the April 28 Day of Mourning ceremony because we could not meet in person, to mourn, and the March declaration of COVID restrictions didn't leave enough time to organize a virtual event.

It's been a year since then and we have endured two pandemic waves, lockdowns, restrictions and anti-mask protests that have attracted racist supporters. Even now, despite the arrival of vaccines, new variants continue to threaten us.

Our world has changed. On one hand, we are praised as pandemic heroes, on the other our own government attacks our wages, our jobs, our working conditions and our pensions. Some members of the public applaud us in the streets, while others mock us for wearing masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) as we go about our essential work. Often, we've had to fight to get the PPE we need. Heroes one minute, zeroes the next.

All this has wounded not only our bodies, but also our spirits. Three AUPE members have died from COVID-19. Many more have got sick. Tens of thousands of us are working longer hours, working short staffed as those who are sick or isolating disappear from worksites. We continue to work on the front lines, putting our own health at risk while providing care of services that Albertans need.

We have found ways to see each other. We Zoom. We Facetime. We do phone video chats. But we still miss the human contact, the in-person chats, the hugs for family, friends and colleagues. We miss the warmth of human smiles, because so often we are wearing masks.

That's why this year, we decided we must have a Day of Mourning event. It will have to be digital, of course. We could not skip another year when so much has happened. So, on April 28, we will gather again to mourn those who have died.

We will gather to support those who have got sick or injured while working and who may suffer long-term health consequences. And we will gather to celebrate those who continue to go to work every day despite the increased risks, and pay tribute to those AUPE members who have struggled every day to promote safety in their workplaces.

This year, we will be presenting the Rolyn Sumlak award, one of AUPE's highest honours, to nine members, covering 2020 and 2021.

Winners of the Rolyn Sumlak Awards for 2020

Judy Fader, Local 043
Oscar Steiner, Local 003
Dee Erickson, Local 048
Dean Walker, Local 005

Rolyn Sumlak Award winners for 2021

Bowman Pringle, Local 003
Elizabeth Czernyanski, Local 049
Frank Snow, Local 052
Jennifer Corkum, Local 046
Stephen Caughie, Local 071

AUPE Local 012 commissioned the Rolyn Sumlak Award in 1990 to commemorate the untimely workplace fatality of Rolyn Sumlak and celebrate AUPE members who work to improve health and safety from the front lines to help prevent workplace tragedies. The awards are presented by AUPE's Occupational Health and Safety committee.

Please join us at our Day of Mourning ceremony. It has been a tough year – and the pandemic isn't over yet. We need each other more than ever.

You can watch the ceremony by clicking here at 1:30pm on April 28. The ceremony will last until 2:30pm.