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Workplace health and safety is a core value of the labour movement. What role do unions play to ensure the health and safety of workers? How has health and safety in the workplace evolved?

"I can't do this." When I got carbon monoxide poisoning while working as a lifeguard, my union gave me the confidence to refuse to return to work in unsafe conditions until my employer resolved the issue. The extra layer of protection of being a union member was significant to me as a young worker. It was once again safe when I returned to work; however, the incident affected my mental health. The pool, which had been a safe, happy place for me growing up as a competitive swimmer, no longer felt completely safe at the pool. This took a toll on my mental health, but I have been able to overcome this with the help of my union and the resources they have provided. The support I received to advocate for myself and recover inspired me to create a mental health toolkit to help others do the same, whether or not they are union members. I partnered with a small team of youth from across the province and BC Children's Hospital to create a mental health toolkit distributed to every school-aged child in British Columbia. The toolkit brought mental health awareness to many communities across the province, inspiring youth to act and giving them the tools to advocate for mental illness services.

The heart of the labour movement is workplace health and safety. As we move into the 21st century, mental health is becoming widely accepted as an integral component of worker well-being. Promoting the mental health of workers and the unique mental health challenges they face is one of the many crucial roles unions play in creating a safe, supportive work environment.

Advocating for policies that promote well-being is one of the primary roles of unions in promoting mental health in the workplace. This includes advocating for better working conditions, such as reduced workloads, better scheduling, and improved workplace communication. Additionally, negotiating for the provision of mental health benefits, including employee assistance programs and mental health coverage under health insurance plans, is another way unions can ensure the health and safety of workers. Finally, unions must educate workers and employers about mental health issues in the workplace and empower workers to seek help by providing training and resources.

Workplace health and safety has evolved greatly over the years and now includes a greater focus on mental health. This reflects a growing understanding of the significant impact that mental health issues have on worker productivity and well-being. Unions have played a critical role in raising awareness about mental health issues in the workplace and advocating for practices that promote mental health.

Despite this progress, mental health issues in the workplace will continue to be challenging for many. Many workers face increased stress and anxiety after the pandemic due to remote work, social isolation, and economic uncertainty. The pandemic has highlighted not only the importance of mental health in the workplace but that health and safety in the workplace are continually evolving, as well as the role unions play in it.