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(FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE)

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### **McGuinty's Choice of WSIB Chair Called a Betrayal of Injured Workers**

(Hamilton) The Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups (ONIWG) held an emergency meeting today as a result of Premier McGuinty's choice of Elizabeth Witmer as the new Chair of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. ONIWG is the umbrella organization representing local injured worker groups across Ontario.

"McGuinty has betrayed injured workers for political gain," said Karl Crevar, Treasurer of ONIWG. "Elizabeth Witmer is responsible for the mess our workers' compensation is in today and McGuinty put her in charge of the WSIB? I feel the Premier has betrayed the injured workers of Ontario." Witmer was the Minister of Labour during the Harris government which reduced employers' WSIB rates by about 30% between 1996 and 2001. During the recent WSIB Funding Review by labour arbitrator Harry Arthurs, the WSIB acknowledged that if employer rates had been left at 1996 levels, the WSIB's unfunded liability would have been eliminated by 2006. The unfunded liability is now about \$12 billion. Although this is solely the result of employers not paying enough premiums, injured workers are now being forced to pay through benefit cuts.

As Labour Minister for the Harris government, in 1997 Ms. Witmer brought in major changes to the workers' compensation system known as Bill 99. At the time, Liberal MPP Dwight Duncan called the bill "draconian" and "a backward step". Symbolically, the bill removed "workers" and "compensation" from the name of the Board and brought private insurance industry practices into the system. Benefit levels were reduced, cost of living adjustments were virtually eliminated, compensation for workplace stress was eliminated and the formerly independent Workers' Compensation Appeals Tribunal was required to apply WSIB policy.

"Bill 99 privatized vocational rehabilitation" said Peter Page, ONIWG President. "From then on, all the money went to private service providers. Injured workers got second rate training in fly-by-night schools and employers would not hire them." A 2009 study by KPMG of the WSIB Labour Market Re-entry Program found that one and a half years after successful completion of a WSIB training program, a little over 50% of the graduates remained unemployed although their WSIB benefits had been cut on completion of the training. "We fought Witmer's privatized system for more than 10 years. We finally convinced the WSIB to cancel the privatized services last year, and now she's back!"

"Since Witmer brought in Bill 99, poverty has risen dramatically for injured workers. We did a survey of injured workers recently and we found an 80% drop in full time employment after injury, nearly half had to give up their home and 30% were relying on food banks. All this comes as a result of the changes brought in by Witmer and Harris. You can imagine how injured workers feel to see Elizabeth Witmer appointed to head up the WSIB" said Steve Mantis, Secretary of ONIWG.

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