

The Power to Deny

I am Jim Hobbs' daughter – one of the 27,500 Ontario miners subjected to mandatory aluminum inhalation under the McIntyre Powder aluminum prophylaxis experiment.

Standing with me are workers, family members, friends and advocates of other occupational disease clusters – GE Peterborough, Kitchener Rubber Workers, and Victims of Chemical Valley in Sarnia – who bear similar stories of toxic workplace exposures and unanswered questions about the health effects of those exposures.

Many people gather on Injured Workers Day because the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board has denied their claims for recognition of work-related injuries and illnesses.

This is especially true for occupational diseases, where symptoms may not appear for years or even decades – long after employers have closed shop, long after exposure records are nowhere to be found, long after medical records have been destroyed – making it next to impossible to document exposures, prove diagnoses, hold industry accountable, and succeed in a WSIB claim.

In 1914, the workers of Ontario gave up our right to sue our employers for workplace injury or illness, in exchange for the right to fair compensation should we be injured or made sick by our jobs. We kept our end of the deal.

WSIB has the power to grant our right to fair compensation or to deny our right to fair compensation. And with each denial comes a multitude of other denials.

You deny us our dignity. The acknowledgment that our years of exposure to multiple toxins is significantly responsible for our sickness.

You deny us our right to know. How many others? How many others in the same workplaces, exposed to the same toxins are suffering the same diseases?

You deny us the opinions of our physicians, and substitute the opinions of your hired guns.

You deny the evidence that we hold in our bodies. That we live with, rally against, and die from – in numbers that defy your decision to deny.

You deny us the peace of dying with the knowledge that our families will be taken care of by the fair compensation that we were promised.

Your power to deny us is vast. It overwhelms us. It angers us. It leaves us without hope. Without justice. Without health or the financial means to fight back.

Yet here we are. Gathered here together in defiance of your power. In defiance of the oppression that we feel. We gather as workers, as family members, as friends, as advocates. We gather for those who are too ill to be here. We gather for those who have died without justice.

We gather as Allied Forces.

There are more of us than there are of you. We have suffered more. We have faced more challenges. We work harder. We help each other. We overcome adversity.

And we, too have the power to deny.

We deny you our silence. You will hear our voices.

We deny you the comfort of our anonymity. You will see our faces. You will know our stories. Our struggles. Our suffering.

We deny you our isolation. We will find one another. We will gather. We will organize. We will stand together. We will fight back.

We deny you your narrative. We will expose you – and challenge your power to deny.

Janice Martell

June 1, 2019
Injured Workers' Day
Queen's Park
Toronto, ON