

Knowledge Activism and Workplace Mental Health (Slide 1)

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Good morning everyone. I'm really happy to be here especially given that it's May 1st. And thanks to Val and OHCOW for inviting me, although I do have to admit it is a little early for me as I'm now living the easy retired life on Vancouver Island. Congratulations as well to John Oudyk for his amazing contributions to OHS in Ontario and across Canada.

My talk today is about a certain type of worker representation called knowledge activism and its connection to the prevention of stress and mental health problems in the workplace. I imagine some or even many of you have heard this KA term before today – given that the OFL, OHCOW and several unions in Ontario including of course USW have made considerable use of the concept in their training and communications. But just to be clear what we are talking about, let me begin by outlining how I define KA based on past research.

What is KA? (slide 2).

Although my early research in the 1980s identified some important differences in the way reps. operated (Hall, 1989; 1996), it wasn't until I and colleagues did research in the auto sector in 2003-05 (Hall et al, 2006) that we first coined the term knowledge activism to refer to worker OHS reps who strategically collect and employ information and knowledge to promote and achieve positive improvements in workplace health and safety. Using both qualitative interview data and large sample survey data, a later study done in 2012-13 (Hall

et al., 2016), again conducted with several colleagues including John, offered further evidence that relative to other types of representation, KA reps. were much more effective at challenging management's control and gaining substantial improvement in OHS conditions. Researchers in Quebec, the UK, Australia, and Europe have subsequently found evidence supporting KA as an effective form of OHS representation (Baril-Gingras and Dubois-Ouellet, 2018; Walters, Johnstone, Quinlan, and Wadsworth, E. 2016; Walters and Wadsworth, 2020).

Based on our research, we identified several common or distinctive operational characteristics that KAs tended to exhibit: **(Slide 3)**

- 1) Reps. build their knowledge through education and research and by working with both workplace insiders and outsiders, and then strategically and tactically use this knowledge and research to make claims, challenge positions, present solutions, and build legitimacy, influence and trust.
- 2) They work both within **and** outside the joint committee context building relationships, gathering information and advocating for workers.
- 3) They recognize and understand the political demands of representation – that change involves politics and that the role of the worker rep. or reps. is to figure out how to mobilize power using knowledge, the law, and worker support.
- 4) A key basis of their power is achieved by educating, involving and organizing workers about hazards and preventive solutions, while involving and engaging workers in the monitoring and change processes.

- 5) To challenge management and to negotiate from positions of power, KAs also try to educate and persuade managers and supervisors about hazards and the advantages of proactive injury and disease prevention, often seeking to counter oppositional management cultures which reduce health and safety to simple questions of cost. Also, they recognize that effective relations with different managers and supervisors may require flexibility and different tactical approaches.
- 6) They are assertive and persistent, recognizing that change often takes time and a long-term strategy.
- 7) They don't just identify or complain about hazardous conditions, they seek to provide or jointly develop solutions with costing and process options.
- 8) **(Slide 4)** They recognize the value of inspections, committee meetings, reports and minutes and use them as tools to achieve change, but they do not define their representation role in these terms. They are aware of management efforts to confine their activities to this technical or bureaucratic box and diligently work to maintain their activist stance.
- 9) They recognize the limitations of current OHS law and rep./worker rights under the law, but they learn how to use the law, rights and regulations where they provide leverage. Where possible, they develop relationships of trust or respect with local MOL inspectors and use those relationships strategically.

- 10) They seek formal management and union support for more dedicated paid time for representation as well as other rights or powers, and build and implement political strategies to achieve these gains.

The connection between KA, Stress and MH?

Okay, now that we have some idea of what KA is and how KAs conduct themselves, what does KA have to do with mental health? **(Slide 5)** Well, there are two main points I want to make today – the first revolves around the important role that knowledge activism can, and I think does play in addressing and reducing workplace stress and mental health problems. My second point speaks to the stress and mental health challenges that KAs themselves experience in their role as representatives, and the need for unions and other labour organizations to pay more attention to reducing activist stress and supporting their mental health. To tie these two things together, my overall argument here is that if we fail to do a better job of supporting the mental health of activist representatives, we will also fail to make progress on worker stress prevention and treatment.

Before saying anything else, I want to first acknowledge that our original research did not focus specifically on worker or rep. stress and mental health – and indeed, most of our data was really about the reps. efforts to prevent physical injuries and disease. This was largely a reflection of the time when the research was being done. When I first started to do research on representation in mining in the 1980s right up to the rep research in the auto sector in the early 2000s, the labour movement recognition of stress and mental health issues was at its early stages. As such, very few reps. at this juncture voiced any awareness

of stress issues as something they saw themselves addressing in their committees or in their other activities. However, by the time we did the more major survey and interview study in 2012-14, violence and harassment were becoming more significant labour and public concerns, which fueled increasing recognition that stress and mental health should be on the joint committee agenda. As well, since this later research included a range of white collar and blue collar occupations, there were definite occupational differences in the recognition of violence and harassment.

However, what was also evident in the 2012-14 research (**Slide 6**) was that the KAs, to some extent across the occupational categories, were more likely to voice awareness of violence and harassment as OHS issues and/or were active trying to address the issues (Hall et al.,2013; 2016). A recognition of the broader scope of stress and mental health prevention beyond violence and harassment was still largely under-developed in most workplaces, but some KAs were distinctive in that they voiced a recognition of the need to expand their work and their committee's work in this area.

These findings that KAs were early adopters of violence, harassment and stress issues are consistent with our general data on KAs – that is, because KAs are oriented towards research, education and knowledge development, they are more likely to recognize new and emerging areas of concern and, accordingly, are more likely to play an important role in shifting how occupational health is defined and perceived by employers, unions, the public, and the state. So, although still at the early stages, it was the KA reps. in 2012-13 who were reporting struggles with managers, government inspectors and sometimes even

their own union and fellow workers around getting them to pay attention to stress and its impacts.

I am less certain whether the management reluctance to acknowledge and address stress as a critical OHS issue is as much a problem today as it was then, given the lack of current research specifically asking this question; but I do know from a recent study I did with Eric Tucker during COVID that many nursing and teacher reps. were still struggling to get managers to pay serious attention to stress as a key consequence of covid. This and my own personal experiences as a rep in my university, make me think that we still have a long way to go in getting work stress and mental health addressed.

But the more significant point I am trying to make here is that if stress prevention and treatment in the workplace is going to progress beyond the government and employer emphasis on violence and harassment, KAs are best placed to have a significant impact in making that happen, for the same reasons they tend to be more effective in addressing conventional physical or chemical hazards. To confirm whether they are doing so, and whether they are being successful certainly requires research dedicated to these questions, but I would suggest that KAs are likely to be critical leaders in this effort.

Moreover, when unions and other labour supportive organizations provide education and research support on stress definitions, measurement and prevention, it is likely the KAs who will be most responsive in as much as they are generally more innovative and sensitive to new information and opportunities to expand their understanding. In as much as KAs take an educational and persuasive approach to change, I would also argue that they can be a critical force for broader cultural and regulative change in the way workplace stress is

defined, regulated and addressed. They may well have already played a critical role in how things have changed thus far but, as I acknowledge, we need more research on this. I'm hoping that John's presentation today will speak at least in part to this argument - that is, the extent to which KAs have been critical to his efforts to expand stress prevention knowledge and intervention.

Of course, **KAs can't** achieve this goal of expanding the recognition and prevention of work stress by themselves as isolated representatives working in their respective workplaces. Organizational and network connections are crucial to any large-scale change. But one of the major reasons organized labour may fall short of this goal is because the reps. themselves are vulnerable to stress and burnout, a problem which labour organizations are best placed to address and need to address.

The Stress of Representation and Activism (Slide 7)

Now I have to again qualify my remarks. To my knowledge, there are no specific studies on the stress or mental health of OHS representatives,¹ and as noted, this was not a focus of our original research. However, there is a substantial stress research literature on activists in other social justice areas such as anti-racism, the environment, human rights, etc. and much of that literature suggests that significant stress and burnout are often associated with activism (Mannarini and Talo, 2011; Chen and Gorski, 2015; Gorski and Chen, 2015; Rodgers, 2010; Nah, 2021). Moreover, while we didn't design our research to look at rep. stress, the worker representatives we interviewed often provided evidence consistent with the general literature on activism, in that many reps including KAs reported experiencing

substantial stress, anxiety, frustration and even depression as they carried out their activities. Some worried whether they could continue for much longer without burning out. And, although we 've never tracked this specifically, there were indications that retention and turnover of worker representatives was a significant problem. For example, in one of our studies, when we tried to follow-up with KA reps. after a year, we discovered that several had either quit or had been effectively forced out of their jobs and had lost their employment. Many reps. in all the studies told us that they had doubts about their ability to continue, or more explicitly they didn't expect to continue much longer in their role because the workload and stress were too great.

Sources of Stress

In terms of the sources of stress, workload was often a major problem for KAs because they were trying to do their regular jobs as well as the committee, research, education and political work that they thought was important, frequently without formal paid time allowances. Even if they were given extra time to work on their rep. duties, the hours they put in far exceeded those required by law (or their CBAs if they had any provisions). This also often meant that they were spending less time with their families which became another source of conflict and strain for some.

Although KAs tended to have more successes than other reps, KAs and other reps. often talked about the frustration they experienced in trying to get management to make changes and complained about their limited power to make necessary improvements and the slow pace of change. Reps. also often complained to us about feeling threatened and

harassed, either by individual managers and supervisors, or as part of a more concerted management campaign to get them to quit or back down. In as much as KAs took on more significant OHS issues, it is less than surprising to find that KAs often experienced management pushback and reprisals. Conflicts with workers as well were often reported by reps. as causing concern, and many cited a lack of support from their union and other representatives. Reps. often talked about the ways in which managers and supervisors tried to undermine their efforts and their relationships with workers by trying to pin cutbacks, restrictions on overtime, wage restrictions, etc. on OHS changes that the reps. had been addressing. In these contexts, of course, reps. said they felt isolated and underappreciated. Some expressed the strain of being labeled as troublemakers (although some revealed in it).

While KAs were certainly among the reps. who expressed concerns about the workload and other stresses arising from their representation and activism, it is important to note that when interviewed some KAs had been active for quite some time (some five, ten or more years) and they expressed a commitment to stay in their role for a longer term. It was evident that they were much more comfortable and confident in their position than other KAs and reps. This recognizes that either the stress in some workplaces was less substantial or some KAs reps were better equipped or protected than others to deal with and cope with the stress. I suggest that the differences in stress levels among KAs in particular reflect a bit of both.

In some workplaces, it was clear that KAs, often the reps. with less experience, were in a constant struggle with management, and as I said, sometimes with workers as well; while

in others, reps. reported a more collaborative or cooperative relationship which also tended to translate into a pattern of more easily won successes, and with those successes often a greater degree of respect and support from workers. Some researchers in the OHS area have rightly argued that the differences in conflict and outcomes reflect the fact that some firms are better managed than others with stronger built-in commitments to OHS. And there is something to that, but I think it is also important to note that some of these less stressful relationships with managers and workers were at least partly a consequence of the work done by KAs over the preceding years to develop trust and legitimacy with management and the workforce. This was reflected in accounts of some veteran reps. who talked about the challenges they had when they first started, seeking to educate and win over managers and workers to a more proactive approach to prevention grounded in science and technology; and then about the improvements they'd seen in relations over time.

Thus, it is important to recognize that the features that make knowledge activism more effective as a form of worker representation, are also the same features that can help reps. to manage or limit the stress associated with their activism. As any experienced KA knows, there are always going to be conflicts between labour and capital over OHS issues. But as we've argued elsewhere, knowledge activism offers reps. a strategic and tactical framework which can yield positive worker gains while relying less on the confrontational politics that some reps. employ. This, in itself, can help to reduce the stress, and to the extent that KAs also tend to be more effective or successful, success too is an important

moderator of stress, in part because it reinforces their confidence, their relationships with workers and their sense of meaning and accomplishment.

But I emphasize again that the use of KA strategies does not mean that there are no conflicts and stress. Even for the most successful veteran KAs, their workplaces and labour processes and relations were always subject to a variety of changes and pressures which tended to introduce new OHS threats and/or challenged the historical work that the KAs had done to build relationships, legitimacy and trust; and in that sense, all reps are subject to ongoing as well as new sources of stress which they have to resolve and/or cope with.

So, while there are clearly differences between workplaces in the stress they present to reps., it does appear that some KAs are better positioned or able to manage or cope with the stress better than other KAs and reps. To the extent that this translates into greater rep. longevity and all the benefits that go with rep. experience and knowledge, it is important for us to understand what makes some KAs more resilient and/or protected than others. For example, in our data, it does appear that some KAs had somewhat different attitudes about their activities and how they judged their impact– that is, some recognized that change often takes time and patience, and as such, they experienced less frustration and disappointment when their gains were gradual or initially limited. When asked what advice they would give reps. just starting their position, several reps. pointed out that it was important for them not to get angry or frustrated, not only because expressing that anger often led to a similar response from managers, but also because the reps. recognized that it was not good for their own mental health to be angry all the time. As one rep. put it in our 2012-14 study, “I think the main part is, don’t get too upset about things, some may take a

month or two, a month or three months to get fixed because it usually comes around and is fixed in the reasonable amount of time. So get along with your boss, your foreman, whatever... Just play it cool ... (laughs) don't get too upset because you know what, it doesn't help" (JHSC011). So, there are kinds of 'emotional labour' that some reps. employ within themselves which help them to better manage the slow pace of change, and also continue to keep their relations with management and workers on an even keel.

Organizational Supports

However, the capacity of KAs and other reps. to cope with stress is not just on them – it is also a reflection of the social and other supports they have available to them (**Slide 9**). Lots of evidence in the general activist literature show that the ability of reps. to persist with their activism is strongly linked to the relationships they have with the organizations in which they are working (Mannarino and Talo, 2011). Some of these linkages are just basic emotional supports – providing channels for activists to express their concerns and get feedback and confirmation from 'like others', but it is also about the range of resources that representatives gain through their organizational relationship.

With respect to worker reps., labour unions, worker centers and OHS centers are all relevant organizations here. For example, in our findings, KAs. often talked about the crucial information and advice they had obtained from organizations like OHCOW, but even in these situations, sometimes it was the emotional support that was part of that exchange that seemed to make the difference in their confidence and self-respect. When Eric Tucker and I did our recent study on worker voice during Covid (Hall and Tucker, 2022; 2023), reps.

differed in the extent to which they felt they were supported by their union. Those that felt supported expressed considerable satisfaction with the help and support they received even when they were still not successful in getting management to listen. Not surprisingly, those who weren't well connected to their union or other organizations like OHCOW expressed more concerns that they felt stressed and uncertain about their situation, and insecure about whether they were doing what was needed. Critically, they felt more isolated, and consequently, these were the reps. who began to question their continued involvement.

Of course, reps. themselves can and must do some of the work needed to build and maintain those relationships and, as our evidence shows, this is a key feature of KAs – they actively work to develop their relationships, networks and connections within and outside their workplaces. However, we also have to ask - what can labour organizations do to ensure that reps. are better connected and supported so that they get both the emotional support they need and the other resources that give them the confidence and the tools they need to succeed (**slide 10**). Here are some suggestions although I'm sure there are many other ways organizations can help:

- Open and maintain periodic and emergency two-way communications between union OHS staff and reps. Offer advice, information, emotional support, etc.
- Help reps. to build and maintain rep. networks within and between workplaces (on-line or in person places where reps. can communicate, meet, discuss, exchange ideas and experiences, etc.)
- Expand and strengthen rep. education programs specific to rep. stress and MH
- Make professional MH/counselling services available to reps.
- Recognize and address rep. concerns and requests about workload, training and education, tools, etc. through funding, staffing, collective bargaining, etc.

I'll end it here and, as I said, I hope my comments lead us into John's presentation about all the work he and others have been doing to conduct and deliver research data on stress and mental health. Thank-you.

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¹ I learned from John Oudyk that he and colleagues at the ONA had done a stress study with OHS reps. in 2012 that was not published although a poster session was presented(Experience and Effects of Offensive Behaviours among Ontario Nurses' Association Health & Safety Representatives Nancy Johnson and Erna Bujna, Ontario Nurses' Association, Toronto, ON, and John Oudyk, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, Hamilton, ON. The findings confirmed high levels of stress with bullying and violence experiences.