



Manitoba Federation of Labour Submission to the Manitoba Standing Committee on Private Bills on Bill 219

The Workplace Safety and Health Amendment Act (Inappropriate or Unsafe Footwear)

April 24, 2018

Manitoba Federation of Labour

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Bill 219: *The Workplace Safety and Health Amendment Act (Inappropriate or Unsafe Footwear)*

The Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) is Manitoba's central labour body, representing the interests of more than 100,000 unionized workers. We support this bill that would ban employers from requiring workers to wear footwear like high heels that expose them to significant workplace safety and health hazards.

All workers deserve to be safe on the job, and employers have a responsibility to ensure that employees have safe and healthy workplaces. Unfortunately, many workplaces in Canada have dress codes that require employees, primarily women, to wear uncomfortable footwear, such as high heels, throughout their entire shift. Obviously, these types of mandatory dress codes particularly impact women workers, and especially in the service and hospitality industries. These dress codes can lead to detrimental impacts during the long, demanding shifts where workers are on their feet for the vast majority or all of their shifts. Dress codes that require unsafe footwear place workers at greater risk of slipping or falling, or suffering from joint injury.

Current footwear protections under Manitoba's *Workplace Safety and Health Act* deal with a number of workplaces, but neglect to consider service and hospitality industries. This oversight can permit workers, primarily women workers, to be exposed to unsafe working conditions. Being a woman should not mean you are forced to wear high heels. Workplace dress codes should not be allowed to discriminate against women or any other group of workers, or expose them to known hazards.

This bill would create greater workplace safety and health protections for employees in the hospitality and service sectors, and we certainly hope that all parties come together to support this legislation. Workplaces should be safe for everyone so that all workers feel comfortable on the job and be able to come home to their loved ones free from injury. Many workplace health and safety policies are in place to protect workers in the

other sectors from risk of falls, discomfort, or foot related incidents. But these same policies are not carried forward to service and hospitality sectors.

Every Manitoban should be able to go to work and not fear discomfort and injury.

But women in these industries have said they have missed shifts due to sore feet, have been asked to stay home, or in some cases lost their jobs for not complying with wearing high heels. Women should not miss out on their right to work due to discriminatory dress codes being imposed on them. These types of dress code create an unsafe work environment by placing employees at risk while on the job and long term. We believe workplaces should be fair and treat men and women equally.

According to the Canadian Federation of Podiatric Medicine, women experience four times as many foot problems as men. Prolonged wearing of high heels can cause many health problems. Wearing high heels can cause bunions, toe cramps, and excess stress on ankles and knees which increases the risk of joint degeneration and osteoarthritis all while also contributing to hip and lower back pain.

The risk of these types of life altering problems can be reduced for many Manitoba women if we ensure that the strengthened workplace health and safety protections in this bill are put in place. At a time where #MeToo and Time's Up movements empower women to stand up for their rights and to ensure women and girls feel safe and respected in the workplace, on the streets, and in our homes, it is our job to ensure that they can feel safe and comfortable to perform their required tasks at work. Objectifying women through the imposition of sexist dress codes is not only physically hazardous, but it is also a form of harassment and should not be allowed under any circumstances.

While progress has been made over the years to ensure greater equality in the workplace, there is still a long way to go. Gender wage gaps still exist, and far too few women are in leadership positions in the public and private sectors. And women are the focus of unwarranted sexual attention, harassment, and assault in all types of

workplaces. Until we are in a society where women are not subjected to misogyny and gendered expectations, our society will not be equal.

Similar bans on high heels and other unsafe footwear have already been put in place in other Canadian jurisdictions. British Columbia banned workplace requirements that force women to wear high heels last spring. This year Ontario brought in a number of workplace changes that included a ban on employers forcing women workers to wear high heels. The MFL believes that Manitoba should follow these progressive workplace changes and ensure that workers in the service and hospitality industries are no longer forced to be at health and safety risks due to unsafe footwear on the job. It is time to end these gendered dress codes and make this type of work safe.

We do hope that the government will support this common sense bill that would reduce hazards faced by women in many workplaces. But I need to point out that so far, the Pallister government has made a number of decisions that weaken workplace safety and health protections in Manitoba.

Budget 2018 cuts nearly \$800,000 from workplace health and safety, meaning that there will be less focus on keeping people safe on the job. The Pallister government has already eliminated the minister's advisory council on health and safety and the Brandon and District Worker Advocacy Office. The number of workplace health and safety inspections has declined since they came to office. They're even talking about watering down Manitoba's standards for protecting workers from harmful chemicals. And they've created an arbitrary rule that requires government to eliminate two protections, for every new protection added. Workplace health and safety protections are in place for good reasons, to keep workers safe on the job. They shouldn't be cut arbitrarily.