

We Must Act
for an
Environmentally
Sustainable
Future

Air Pollution is Killing Us

The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 11 Component and 3 affiliate unions. Taken together we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 390,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

Larry Brown, President

Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer

Air Pollution is Killing Us

The emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs), which contributes to climate change, is only one form of the many pollutants entering our air by burning coal, oil, gas, and wood. Air pollution constitutes a serious threat to all living things on this planet.

New data from World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that 9 in 10 people breathe air containing high levels of pollutants. Estimates are that at least 7 million people die every year as a result of exposure to ambient (outdoor) and household air pollution.¹

WHO identifies air pollution as a critical risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), causing an estimated

- 24% of all adult deaths from heart disease,
- 25% from stroke,
- 43% from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease,
- 29% from lung cancer.

Moreover, air pollution has disproportionate impacts. According to Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO,

Air pollution threatens us all, but the poorest and most marginalized people bear the brunt of the burden. It is unacceptable that over 3 billion people—most of them women and children—are still breathing deadly smoke every day from using polluting stoves and fuels in their homes. If we don't take urgent action on air pollution, we will never come close to achieving sustainable development.²

The impact of air pollution is more pronounced in the world's poorer countries. More than 90% of air pollution-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, mainly in Asia and Africa, but also the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe and the Americas.³

There is a tendency to think of severe air pollution, and the negative effects associated with it, as the problem of countries in the developing world. However, recent research indicates that, in 2015, air pollution cost Canadian families approximately \$39 billion due to premature deaths and illness.

The report produced by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), called the Costs of Pollution in Canada, is a compilation of scientific data on all aspects of pollution and represents the most comprehensive assessment of pollution and its costs undertaken in Canada. The strength of the study was in looking at the overall impacts of pollution on Canadians and the Canadian economy.

Pollution also costs families, businesses and governments money straight out of their pockets. When people get sick from pollution—perhaps with an asthma attack caused by smog—they need treatment. This can be costly. Medications, visits to the hospital, lost

time at work—all these are a burden on households' incomes. Businesses and governments face costs too. Farmers lose money when their crops are damaged by air pollution.⁴

This report cites studies that indicate that the annual number of premature deaths in Canada caused by air pollution is nearly 7,700. However, the total human, social, and economic costs of pollution remain unknown as the research and data are unavailable.

The example from the report of the health consequences of smog helps illustrate the complexity of the issue.

Smog is made up of several different pollutants, the most damaging of which is fine particulate matter, or PM2.5. PM2.5 is made up of particles about one-thirtieth the width of a human hair. Because of their small size, these particles are capable of penetrating deep into the respiratory tract. There they can cause a number of health effects, including cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses. In extreme cases, smog exposure can lead to premature death. The latest figures indicate that 7,712 deaths were attributable to PM2.5 and the other components of smog in Canada in 2015.⁵

It is important to remember that air pollution is not confined to geographic areas or political borders. For example, the decision by the US President to support the country's struggling coal industry could mean increased levels of air pollution for Canada. While Toronto has started to see a decline in air pollution levels, this effect could be reversed if coal production in the Ohio Valley is increased.

The good news is that clean and sustainable energy sources are now more available than ever before. A shift to sustainable energy sources will be necessary to combat climate change and reduce the effects of air pollution. Although these solutions receive widespread support, crucial barriers to overcome will be the major corporate and those government interests that are opposed.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/02-05-2018-9-out-of-10-people-worldwide-breathe-polluted-air-but-more-countries-are-taking-action>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/costs-of-pollution-in-canada-highlights-en.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.



NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

- B. C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU)
- Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSABC)
- Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA)
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union (SGEU)
- Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU)
- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of Public Services International.

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