



AIRPORT CHECK-IN WORKERS

HAZARD

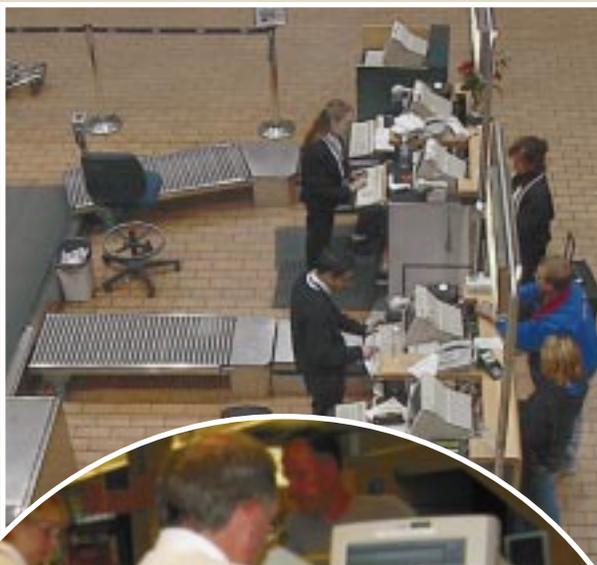
CAW LOCAL 2002 members work at airport check-in counters throughout Canada from Gander to Victoria to Inuvik. Dr. Ellen Rosskam of the ILO (International Labour Organization) worked with the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), our union and unions in Switzerland as well as CCOHS (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety) to investigate the hazards of these jobs. The study found a high risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders as well as a risk of violence from passengers.

The check-in agents handle more than one hundred pieces of baggage a day having an average weight of 33 kg. each. Where the baggage handling systems are not mechanized,

the check-in agents lift and carry each bag to the conveyor belt. (At non-mechanized baggage check-in systems, workers can lift and carry up to 600 bags a day, weighing on average 33 kg. each. This means that workers may lift and carry up to almost 20,000 kg. a day). Even at fully mechanized baggage check-in systems, workers often push and pull bags, often in painful postures.

Dr. Rosskam had this to say:

"Check-in workers are also subjected to immense stress. Present management practices applying 'just in time' policies mean that workers should check in passengers (including check-in and baggage handling) in around three minutes. But if for any reason the agent spends more time - such



as with a passenger who doesn't understand the instructions, or with an elderly passenger who may move more slowly with their baggage, etc. - they must try hard to make up the time later, because at the end of the line is an airplane waiting to take off. A missed schedule is costly. At the check-in counter, the agent knows this very well. So you can imagine the pressure. At the same time, workers are not consulted about the organization of their work, they do not have a voice in workplace decision-making, nor are they consulted about problems they may be experiencing. Communication is top-down only, whereas it could easily be top-down and bottom-up. This environment, full of repetitive physical effort and stress due to existing management practices, favours the occurrence of MSD."

"The industry-wide use of 'just in time' policies in airports has caused an increase in pressure which is exerted directly on the check-in workers, pushing them to work faster. The objective is to avoid as much as possible delays in takeoffs, which are very costly to the airlines. There are more people travelling today through airports than ever before. 'Just in time' policies impose a speed-up in the work process. To characterize the situation, one might say that the agents have more work to complete in less time, while remaining smiling and polite with passengers who are more and more aggressive, and working under conditions often physically demanding, with no training to protect them against any of these risks. That this has repercussions on their health is not surprising."





"For their part, the check-in workers continue to go to work as though nothing were wrong, in spite of their often severe pains. There is a kind of 'culture of pain' at work; if the majority of people in your professional environment suffer from the same kind of pain as you, you may end up by considering that this is the normal state of things. You may tell yourself it's up to you to put up with the pain and suffering without complaining, and to get on with your work. What I call an occupational culture of pain, combined with the difficulty to obtain diagnosis and compensation, and the fact that workers may be somehow encouraged to use their sick leave rather than activate workers' compensation when needed, may work in consort to cause low or no injury reporting and a low level of lost work time, despite widespread suffering. The workers are motivated to do their job because they strongly identify with their profession and are proud of it."

Key Findings: Backs and RSIs

- 44 per cent were absent from work with back pain and 18 per cent were absent from work with neck pain in the previous year.
- Baggage tagging, either from a sitting or standing position increases pain.
- More injuries occur where there is no mechanised system for handling baggage, and where workers sit for a whole shift.
- Workers suffer more injury and discomfort in international terminals than domestic terminals since baggage is often heavier and larger.
- Workers often lift loads exceeding the standard 30 kg. limit
- Bending low, reaching forward, lifting with one hand, and hauling bags to the conveyor belt puts workers at increased risk of injury, yet few staff receive training on manual lifting.
- Computer work at non-adjustable work stations leads to strained, uncomfortable body posture whether sitting or standing.
- The risks of discomfort and injury remain largely unrecognized due to lack of training.

Prevention Measures

Dr. Roskam says, "The first step in prevention is to recognize that these problems exist. Once there is awareness and recognition of the problems, one can begin to discuss workplace improvements with involvement of the workers directly concerned."

"There are some very simple preventive measures





which can be adopted. Eliminate those workstation arrangements that oblige workers to either remain standing during their entire service, or to remain seated. It is important for workers to be able to alternate positions. The baggage tag dispenser should be placed so that workers are not forced to adopt awkward postures, such as bending over to attach the tags to the baggage and then twisting around to push the bags. Moreover, perhaps there should be a universal baggage weight limit of 20 kg. The check-in counters are often poorly designed; often there is not enough space underneath the counter for the legs when the agents are seated, or even leg room when standing. Workers often end up adopting impossible positions to adapt to what may be a complete lack of leg room under the counter. As well, the work surface of the counter is often too narrow to accommodate all of the documents the agent must deal with. These need to be adapted to the needs of the worker so they may perform their job efficiently and comfortably. Fully mechanized check-in systems are far more desirable than manual systems, but even where costs

prohibit the introduction of a fully mechanized system, at least a roller bar could be installed, to obviate lifting and carrying every bag."

The International Transport Workers' Federation had this to say:

"Many of these problems could be solved for relatively little cost, especially when set against the costs of high levels of injury. Yet the current trend in airports is for lower costs, recruitment of less experienced, younger workers, and the focusing of less attention on working conditions.

There are obviously ways to increase staff comfort. The biggest risk factors come with excessive workloads due to high volumes of passengers, constrained and awkward postures, and strains from lifting or repetitive hand movements. Therefore, managers need to ensure adequate staffing and breaks, and to provide adjustable keyboard trays, adjustable chairs and sufficient leg space. Staff should be able to alternate between sitting and standing during a work shift and they should, for example, be able to view a baggage scale without twisting."

