

Subject: UWUA Safety Message: Heat Illness Prevention and Your Rights Under OSHA

Brothers and Sisters,

As temperatures rise, so does the risk of heat illness. Utility workers are exposed to heat while working outdoors, in trenches, around asphalt and concrete, in power plants, water and wastewater facilities, confined spaces, garages, vaults, warehouses, and other hot indoor and outdoor environments. Heat illness can come on quickly and may become life-threatening if warning signs are ignored.

Heat stress is not “just part of the job.” It is a recognized workplace hazard, and employers have a responsibility to protect workers from heat-related illness and death.

OSHA’s basic message is simple: Water. Rest. Shade. But real heat protection requires more than a slogan. Employers should have a heat illness prevention plan that includes access to cool drinking water, shaded or cooled recovery areas, rest breaks that increase as heat stress increases, acclimatization for new and returning workers, emergency response procedures, training for workers and supervisors, and monitoring of conditions throughout the workday.

Members should watch for signs of heat illness, including heavy sweating, dizziness, headache, nausea, weakness, confusion, cramps, rapid heartbeat, fainting, or hot dry skin. Heat stroke is a medical emergency. If a co-worker is confused, passes out, stops sweating, or shows signs of severe distress, call emergency services immediately and begin cooling the worker while help is on the way.

The UWUA wants every member to understand this important point: even where there is not yet a specific federal OSHA heat standard, employers can still be held responsible under OSHA’s General Duty Clause.

The General Duty Clause, Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, requires employers to provide a workplace free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm. Heat is a recognized hazard. Heat illness can cause serious injury or death, and feasible protections exist. That means an employer who refuses to follow OSHA heat guidance may still be exposing workers to a citable hazard.

If an employer ignores heat hazards or refuses to provide adequate water, rest, shade, cooling areas, training, staffing, acclimatization, or emergency procedures, members should notify their supervisor and union representative. Document the conditions, including the heat index if available, work location, tasks being performed, lack of protections, symptoms reported, and any employer response. The union can use that

information to demand corrective action and, where necessary, file a complaint with OSHA or the appropriate state-plan agency.

No job is so urgent that a worker should be placed at risk of heat stroke. No production goal is more important than going home alive and healthy.

The UWUA calls on all employers to follow OSHA heat illness prevention guidance, respect workers who report symptoms, and work with the union to identify and control heat hazards before someone gets hurt.

Protect yourself. Protect your crew. Speak up early. Heat illness is preventable.

In Solidarity,

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