

How can trade unions prevent mental health issues at work?

The mental health of workers has been deteriorating in recent years, and workplaces are often ill-equipped for dealing with these issues. At the **University of Montréal's** School of Industrial Relations in Canada, **Dr Mélanie Dufour-Poirier** is studying the role of social delegates in the Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ). These union-appointed people help address workers' mental health issues. Mélanie's research focuses on developing strategies to prevent the causes of mental health problems in the workplace, which relies on the collective contributions of all stakeholders to achieve primary prevention.



Dr Mélanie Dufour-Poirier

Associate Professor, School of Industrial Relations, University of Montréal, Canada

Fields of research

Industrial relations, unionism, mental health issues, primary prevention, union-management relations

Research project

Studying the role of social delegates for addressing and preventing workplace mental health issues caused, among other factors, by poor work design

Funders

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Fondation de l'Ordre des Conseillers en Ressources Humaines Agréées (CRHA)

The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the SSHRC

Injuries that occur at work are not only physical, but also psychological. "Psychological injuries in the workplace, specifically those linked to work design, have been increasing throughout the world for many years," says Dr Mélanie Dufour-Poirier from the University of Montréal's School of Industrial Relations. "My research aims to uncover links between work design and the prevalence of certain mental health problems, for example, work-related strain such as anxiety and depression." The increasing mental distress of workers arises from numerous causes, including poor working conditions, unrealistic working demands, poor work-life balance and loss of meaningful working communities.

Talk like a ...

labour relations researcher

Labour relations — the research field that studies the relations between management and workers in workplaces

Longitudinal study — a research study that involves collecting data over an extended period of time

Primary prevention — interventions that prevent harm from occurring in the first place, rather than treating harms that have already occurred

Social delegate — an individual in a workplace (appointed by a trade union) who listens to workers' issues and directs

them towards relevant services and, where necessary, advocates for improved work design

Stakeholder — a person with an interest in an issue

Trade union — an organised association of workers formed to protect their rights and interests in workplaces

Work design — the content and organisation of a person's employment activities and relationships, i.e., how work is carried out in a workplace

Trade unions can play a key role in addressing and preventing these issues. However, preventing mental health issues in the workplace requires a collective approach, with workers and management working together to address the causes of psychological injuries at their source.

The importance of social delegates

One innovation of the Quebec Federation of Labor (FTQ) union organisation was the creation of the Social Delegates Network in 1983. These workers address colleagues' mental health concerns and try to prevent mental health issues at work by advocating for improved work design, among other things. "Social delegates deal with distress at work, often caused by the work itself," explains Mélanie. "In some cases, they

also collaborate with management and workers to amend working practices, enhance working communities and improve management styles." In doing so, social delegates contribute to primary prevention of mental health issues, by addressing the causes of problems.

"Social delegates listen to their colleagues' mental health concerns and provide referrals (to psychologists, social workers or lawyers) to prevent crisis situations," explains Mélanie. "Since the creation of the Network, social delegates have provided support for issues such as addiction, debt, harassment, depression, emotional burnout and suicide." As many of these problems may be caused by issues at work, it is important to change workplace cultures and working practices to improve the mental health of workers.



© PeopleImages.com - Yuri A/Shutterstock.com

Social delegates play an important role in workplaces because employers often lack the capacity to deal with such sensitive and complex issues. While social delegates are not specialists or therapists themselves, as colleagues of the people they help, they understand the context of problems in the workplace. For example, they understand the organisational and management culture in the company, which helps them empathise with workers' concerns and address the causes of problems.

However, being a social delegate is often not easy. "The psychological burden of the role is challenging, as social delegates are responsible for people's welfare," says Mélanie. In many cases, their role is separate from traditional trade union structures, making it difficult to officially define and placing frustrating limitations on their abilities to help colleagues. Social delegates often face a lack of recognition for their work, leaving them feeling they are a low priority. These challenges have the potential to diminish the impact and transformative scope of social delegates' actions. "Breaking taboos and prejudices around mental health is necessary for employers, trade unions and workers to appreciate the role of social delegates in the workplace," says Mélanie.

Studying the impacts of the FTQ's social delegates

Mélanie uses qualitative methodologies to study the role of trade unions and social delegates in protecting workers' mental health in the Canadian province of Quebec. "My longitudinal research spans over thirteen years," she says. "It is based on individual interviews, group discussions and document analyses." Few studies have investigated how trade union innovations are addressing workplace mental health over such a long time period. "My colleague, Dr Jean-Paul Dautel, and I will soon be complementing this qualitative study with a quantitative survey to gain more in-depth knowledge of the mental health problems experienced by workers in Quebec and further afield, and how employers and trade unions can address them," says Mélanie. "We hope to work with trade unions, workers and employers to build

“

Mental health must be considered as a fundamental right at work.

”

a primary prevention programme that promotes better work design to prevent mental health issues.”

Not only does the long timeframe of Mélanie's research provide a rich dataset of changing attitudes towards trade unions and workplace mental health, but it also has allowed her to build relationships with social delegates. "Dealing with trade unions requires building solid relations of deep trust," she says. "Conducting interviews should be considered a gift in any research process and researchers must treasure the experience." Mélanie has worked with trade unions in several countries, establishing her reputation as an expert in her field and building relationships with the people she works with.

The @Trans-faire tool

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted how people worked across the world, and this included how social delegates performed their responsibilities. "The pandemic seriously compromised their ability to act on behalf of workers, at a time when many were experiencing higher psychological distress due to social distancing, the challenges of remote working and global uncertainty," says Mélanie. "Many social delegates quickly found solutions to these problems so they could provide their services remotely."

With her former colleague, Dr Francine D'Ortun, Mélanie developed the @Trans-faire tool (a play on the French words for 'transfer' and 'to do') to collect and share these solutions among social delegates, so they could benefit from a communal knowledge base. "The @Trans-faire tool enables social delegates to voluntarily describe their experiences, as well as the innovations they have developed," says Mélanie. "This collective exchange of knowledge, skills and expertise helps everyone."

Mission for the future

Mélanie believes there is still much to be done to protect and improve mental health in the workplace. In particular, it is important to build systems that prevent psychological injuries before they occur and to consider mental health issues as organisational, not only individual, problems. "Workplaces in Quebec tend not to implement systems of primary prevention that include the active and voluntary participation of all stakeholders," she says. "Primary prevention would require strong collaboration among employers, social delegates (when present), trade union representatives and employees, all of whom must contribute to discussions about work design. Only a collective approach will prevent injuries to mental health." This might require changing how work is organised, conditions for employees and administrative procedures. Mélanie and her colleagues, Dr Nicolas Chaignot Delage and Dr Jean-Paul Dautel, are currently investigating this idea by conducting a large, comparative study of workers in the aerospace industry in Canada and France.

Currently, social delegates are highly useful for addressing workplace mental health issues, but lack the power to prevent these issues from arising. "This requires employer support and open discussions," says Mélanie. "Giving social delegates the tools to perform their role as advocates against distress in the workplace could transform them, and trade unions more generally, into true agents of change when it comes to preventing mental health issues. Now, more than ever, mental health must be considered as a fundamental right at work and a reflection of social justice and industrial democracy in society as a whole. All stakeholders must fight for it as such."

About *labour relations*

'Labour relations' broadly refers to the relations between management and workers in workplaces. It involves considering of a wide range of social, economic and psychological factors, and understanding how these relations can improve working conditions and, therefore, quality of life. Mélanie explains more about her field:

"Labour relations is a multidisciplinary academic field. It studies employment relationships, worker-management relations and the labour market as a whole. It also studies the interactions and interrelations between employers, employees, trade union organisations, employer organisations, and the state. For me, the phenomenon of unionism and collective representation of workers, unionised or not, is of special interest.

"I have investigated union representation in Canada, Chile, Mexico, Peru and the Philippines. My main finding was that there is no such thing as a 'Global North' and 'Global South' when it comes to how unions approach workers' rights, but rather that any differences are anchored in local and regional contexts. Issues need to be studied on a case-by-case basis to be fully understood. Despite having less resources available, trade unions in less developed countries display very interesting initiatives. These organisations are a source of inspiration to me, and should be an inspiration to trade unions in so-called developed countries.

"There are many careers available in labour relations. Organisations can employ psychologists, behaviour specialists and human relations specialists. Other opportunities include trade union representatives, law specialists, labour economists, labour sociologists, public policy specialists and advisors, as well as an array of researchers, practitioners and consultants in these fields."

Mélanie's mental health advice *for students*

Take time for yourself! Being able to work and study effectively requires doing enjoyable things, exercising and a good balance between your studies and social life. Don't forget that your brain also needs to rest, not just your body. And don't feel guilty when you decide to rest and enjoy free time for yourself. I often get my biggest research epiphanies when I'm doing something other than endlessly straining my brain!

Pathway from school to *labour relations*

- Relevant subjects to study at school can vary widely, depending on your ultimate career goals. Examples include business studies, politics, psychology, sociology, communications, computer studies and mathematics.
- At university, Mélanie suggests taking modules in labour relations, which can focus on unionism, collective bargaining, collective representation and grievance processes. Other areas of focus can involve human resources management, organisational behaviour, labour sociology, labour law, labour economy, methodology and public policies.

Explore careers in *labour relations*

- Mélanie recommends talking with researchers, practitioners, consultants and union representatives in different sub-fields of labour relations that interest you, so you can discover what different roles involve.
- Mélanie suggests exploring the websites of societies devoted to labour relations, including l'Ordre des Conseillers en Ressources Humaines Agréés (www.ordrecrha.org; in Quebec), the Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (www.cphr.ca; in Canada), the Canadian Association of Industrial Relations (www.cira-acri.ca) and the Society for Human Resources Management (www.shrm.org; globally), all of which provide educational materials and careers information.
- The FTQ's social delegates website has a wealth of information (in French) about the history and mission of the network: www.ftq.qc.ca/reseau-dentraide-des-delegues-sociaux-et-des-delegues-sociales
- The Canadian Union of Postal Workers has information about the role of social stewards: www.cupw.ca/en/member-resources/social-stewards



Meet Mélanie

When I was younger, my career aspirations were constantly changing! I wanted to be an astronaut, a veterinarian, an astrophysicist, an interpreter, an ambassador... My challenge was to choose something! I loved reading, which allowed me to discover endless sources of knowledge and new ways of thinking.

I have always been intrigued by the complexities concealed in human interactions. I have also always wanted to contribute to the well-being of humanity – to help achieve social justice, democratic thinking and our place in the natural world.

“ I want my work to advocate for a better world for future generations. ”

I used to be a union representative, and my own experience of seeing people suffering from psychological distress at work inspired me to focus on studying labour relations and the role of social delegates.

I love being able to fight for high-level ideals. I want to see industrial democracy and equality among workers – and on a wider level, social justice across humanity in general. I want my work to advocate for a better world for future generations.

I have worked with many very inspiring people during my career. Some have suffered a great deal and, in some nations, have even been tortured and jailed because of their social justice activism. I think these experiences have helped my personal growth to being a better human being, as well as convincing me of the importance of fighting for these ideals. I dedicated my PhD thesis to all these people.

Free time is important for mental health. I enjoy reading, Pilates, meditation, walking in nature and spending time with my precious son and my family, cherishing life.

Mélanie's top tips

1. Focus on your own strengths and what makes you different and wonderful. Don't compare yourself to other people.
2. Follow your heart and try to find what Japanese people call 'Ikigai' – your purpose in life.