

Remarks by GST Warren Mart
Workers Memorial Day
Henderson, KY
April 29, 2006

Good morning sisters and brothers and guests.

It's an honor for me to be here with all of you today to help mark this important occasion.

It's a solemn occasion - no doubt about it – but it's also quite an achievement.

It was no small task for this memorial to go from being just an idea, to becoming the reality it is today.

I want to thank Ray Horton, Roger Stone -- and the Steelworkers here in Henderson --- the Tri County Labor Council and Machinists Union members:

- Bob Delaney, Director of District 154 - Paducah, KY;
- Gerald Stone, Director of Local Lodge 153, Evansville, IN;
- Benny Adair, Larry Johnson, David Childress, & Howard Dawes from the Kentucky State Council of Machinists;
- Kenny Davis & Hugh Crowe, Machinists from Henderson, KY

--- and everyone who contributed the time and money needed to build this solemn memorial.

And I think even the workers we are memorializing would want us to celebrate this day for the victory it truly is.

Today, we say to the world and to the ages, these men and women will not be forgotten.

We all know there are those who don't want to acknowledge the reality that nearly 6,000 times each year, a worker leaves his or her home, goes to work and does not return.

They might be firefighters, police or truck drivers. They might be nurses, flight attendants, production workers or welders. They might be brand new on the job, or seasoned veterans with weeks to go before they retire.

We feel a kinship with these men and women, whether we know them personally or not.

We grieve for them when we hear their stories or read about them in newspapers.

They are part of our great extended family and we are smaller for their loss.

For too long, workers who are killed and injured on the job, or who die from long and painful occupational illnesses, are accepted by an industrial society as a price of doing business.

This memorial forces us all, to look at the true cost of that calculation.

This memorial reminds us that for every victim, there is a family left behind.

Sons must grow up without fathers, daughters without a mother, spouses without a companion.

This is not the same as an accidental death, as heartbreaking as that can be.

The loss of a friend or a family member to a sudden workplace accident is compounded by the fact that, with few exceptions, our workplaces are supposed to be safe.

There are laws that say they must be. Corporations frequently tell us that safety is their Number One concern. And that nothing is more important than the safety of their workers.

But 6,000 times each year – something goes wrong.

A cabdriver gets shot less than a mile from a police station, a steelworker gets crushed under tons of scrap, a machinist is drawn into whirling machinery. The different ways that a life can suddenly be lost are almost countless.

There are less sudden, but no less dramatic ways that workers can suffer too.

At a jet engine plant in Connecticut, members of my union are working to determine the cause of a rare form of brain tumor that has taken the lives of dozens of workers over the years.

Two women, spouses of workers there who were diagnosed and died within months of one another, got together and formed a support group.

They turned their grief into action and eventually forced the company and the state department of health to open an investigation to conditions at the factory.

Every imaginable kind of solvent was used there and tens of thousands of workers were exposed over the years.

It's an ongoing investigation and results may still be months or even years away. But they're determined, and I'm confident their work will save others down the road.

Each year, we have a memorial – similar to this one – on the grounds of our union’s teaching facility in Southern Maryland.

It’s a small granite lighthouse, surrounded by a circular walkway of bricks.

It’s actually very pretty as you approach it. Then you notice that each brick bears the name of a Machinist who lost his or her life on the job.

There are hundreds of bricks around that monument.

At the ceremony, a bell is rung for each name that’s added since the service the year before.

Last year, we rang the bell 31 times.

This year, it will ring again.

After the service, the event becomes more casual, with kids chasing each other around the lighthouse and grown ups sharing stories about the good times.

That kind of service, like this one, becomes an opportunity to remember those men and women.

Sometimes it can be very hard to know how to keep the memory alive of a family member who was suddenly taken from us.

One woman who came to our service a few years ago, lost a daughter who was crushed between an airplane and a piece of ground equipment.

It was as sad a situation as you could imagine. The young woman, in the prime of her life, was alive one minute and dead the next.

Her mother, who also worked at the airport, wore her daughter’s work shirt every day for weeks afterward.

Under any circumstance, it’s unnatural for a child, young or old, to die before his or her parents.

When the death is a result of a sudden accident, it becomes doubly hard to understand or accept.

It sometimes falls to us, their friends and neighbors, to help them through their grief.

This monument, this polished granite reminder, is one way we say to these people that their loved ones will not be forgotten.

There may be some who are shocked by this monument. They will say it is too graphic and too painful.

There are monuments that commemorate terrible events and noble sacrifices in every park, in every state around the country.

In Washington, DC, such monuments are everywhere.

The monument that gets more visitors than nearly any other is the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

It is both simple and overwhelming at the same time.

It is a black granite wall with more than 50,000 names inscribed upon it. It takes several minutes to walk from one end to another.

In that time, the monument makes an impression that is hard to forget.

This monument has that same effect.

I doubt anyone, will look upon this memorial and walk away without feeling a little bit of the weight that worker is carrying.

I think Roger Stone, who designed this memorial, deserves our appreciation for acknowledging the heartbreak and suffering that happens all too often in our workplaces today.

This memorial now takes its place alongside similar memorials in states across the country.

Alongside memorials on the East and West coast to merchant seamen lost at sea; alongside the memorial in Nevada to Chinese workers who perished building the first transcontinental railroad; alongside memorials to miners buried deep below the surface.

These are all workers' memorials.

It is both tragic and fitting that there are so many memorials.

Let us vow to do, as this memorial instructs.

Let us mourn for the dead and fight for the living.

And let us do all in our power, on the job, in state capitols and in Washington, D.C., to protect ourselves and our fellow workers in the days, months and years ahead.

Thank you and God Bless.

