

Workplace safety still under spotlight

Government building safety standards have been an ongoing topic and were again pushed under the spotlight following the recent fire at the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town and vandalism of the Constitutional Court building in Johannesburg.

Suspects have been arrested and are appearing in Court for both these incidents but so far, no reasons have been given for the attacks. Repair costs for the Parliament building are estimated at R220 million after the National Key Point was allegedly left unguarded.

Workplace safety is the responsibility of the employer and employees under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)*. The Act's purpose is to provide for the health and safety of people at work or in connection with the use of plant and machinery. The PSA, on several occasions, had to intervene to ensure the safety of the Union's members after being alerted about unsafe working conditions. This includes the Civitas Building in Pretoria, which despite R1 billion in renovations to the building, remained unsuitable to accommodate employees.

According to the Department of Employment and Labour, the "OHSA requires that the employer brings about and maintains, as far as reasonably practicable, a work environment that is safe and without risk to the health of the workers. Workers and the employer must share the responsibility for health and safety in the workplace. The employer must, however, inform workers of any dangers, how these may be prevented, and how to work safely, and provide other protective measures for a safe workplace".

The employer must also provide all relevant equipment that employees need to protect their health and safety, ensure they know how to use it, and regularly inspect and maintain this equipment.

Employees, however, also have a role to play in ensuring building safety and shop stewards can assist by educating employees on what is expected from them to meet safety standards. Shop stewards can assist by:

- Ensuring that employees understand the legislation as well as a workplace's specific policies and procedures through regular training and follow-up sessions.
- Educate employees on the risks and consequences of not following rules.
- Employees must be provided with copies of the OHSA and regulations.
- Highlighting health and safety rules and procedures of the workplace.
- Monitoring health and safety standards that the employer must maintain at the workplace.

Shop stewards are vital during inspections and can follow up on whether safety issues have been attended to by the employer. They also play a crucial role in ensuring that these standards are met and that workers are safe when they enter the workplace.

Contact your PSA Provincial Office for further guidance and assistance.