

**When it comes to health and safety, your life should be in union hands**

**Many people think the labour movement is about fighting for a better standard of living. Frequently though the battle is more basic. The unions are fighting for their members' lives.**

**Rory O'Neill**

Editor

Hazards magazine

Health, safety and environment officer

International Federation of Journalists

There is no more natural union function than defending the health and safety of members. It is a reason people join unions and a reason people stay in unions. And it has always been so.

Herbert Abrams' *Short history of occupational health*, published last year in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, says: "It is important to recognize that throughout the often tragic history of worker health and disease, the worker played a primary role as the basis of every significant improvement in legislation, factory inspection, compensation, correction, and prevention."

Abrams concludes: "Labour unrest, protests, strikes, lawsuits, and catastrophes were vital catalysts in obtaining action. Organized labour has been the essential factor central to most workplace health and safety improvements, from the industrial revolution to the present."

When it comes to challenging workplace harm, hygienists might have a measure of it and doctors a diagnosis for it, but only workers with collective power have much chance of doing anything about it. And there is no shortage of up-to-the-minute evidence illustrating this “union safety effect.”

The Canadian Labour Congress cites a 1993 study done for the Canadian Ministries of Labour which concludes that union-supported health and safety committees have a significant "impact in reducing injury rates".

Later studies for the Ontario Workplace Health and Safety Agency “found that 78-79 per cent of unionized workplaces reported high compliance with health and safety legislation while only 54-61 per cent of non-unionized workplaces reported such compliance.”

But this isn't a Canadian phenomenon. US academic Adam Seth Litwin, now a board member of the US Federal Reserve, then with the London School of Economics, concluded in a review last year of health and safety in UK workplaces that unions dramatically improve safety in even the most hazardous workplaces.

A non-union office worker was, by Litwin's calculations, 13 times more likely to suffer an injury than was a closed-shop union worker on an industrial assembly line.

Litwin found “strikes and slow-downs serve as efficacious union tools for reducing workplace injuries,” with the most effective union organizational model “the pre-entry closed shop.”

He concludes: “Injury rates can be reduced by allowing for co-determination regarding health and safety, even in situations where industrial relations may be otherwise characterized as adversarial.

“Even if unions and management quarrel over all the other issues, labour possesses vital, tacit, shopfloor knowledge regarding health and safety, knowledge that is imperative for reducing accident rates.”

The true extent of the union protective effect was evaluated in a 1995 study of UK unions. It found that in workplaces with full union recognition and a joint management-union safety committee, serious accident rates were less than half those at firms with no union recognition and no joint committee.

As Owen Tudor, health and safety officer with the UK Trades Union Congress (TUC), put it: “Join a union or your employer will break your legs!”

The story is repeated in Australia. The Australian government’s Workplace Relations Survey 1990-1995 found unionized workplaces were three times as likely to have a health and safety committee, and twice as likely to have undergone a management occupational health and safety audit in the preceding 12 months.

Even in the US, with a relatively low unionization level of 13 per cent, the effect can be seen. A 1991 study, using US data, concluded that unions dramatically increased enforcement of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in the manufacturing sector. Unionized firms had a higher probability of having a health and safety inspection, and their inspections tended to be more probing, as employees exercised their “walkaround rights” — the right to accompany a government inspector during a workplace tour.

Unionized US workplaces were more than five times as likely to be inspected, the research found, and the quality of inspections improved dramatically if the inspector was accompanied by a worker knowledgeable about the hazards in that workplace.

A 1998 paper provides more evidence of the union safety effect. Researchers who surveyed over 400 industrial hygienists and safety engineers in New Jersey concluded “effective strategies for involving workers appear to be conditional on a number of

variables, most importantly on worker activism and the effective use of formal negotiations.”

The researchers, writing in the *Journal of Public Health Policy*, add: “Findings are consistent with studies from both the US and abroad which emphasize the role of unions in shaping opportunities for effective worker participation.

The authors recognize that union education and training is “a critical variable in achieving effective arrangements for worker participation.

“In the US as in other countries, unions assist workers in assessing and understanding health and safety information, and collective bargaining agreements protect workers who refuse abnormally dangerous assignments or confront management about their health and safety concerns.”

Even the World Bank agrees that unions play a life-saving role at work. A 1995 World Bank report noted:

“Trade unions can play an important role in enforcing health and safety standards. Individual workers may find it too costly to obtain information on health and safety risks on their own, and they usually want to avoid antagonizing their employers by insisting that standards be respected.

“A union can spread the cost of obtaining information on health and safety issues among all workers, bargain with employers on the level of standards to be observed, and monitor their enforcement without putting any individual worker at risk of losing his or her job.

“Studies in industrial countries indicate that the role of labor unions in ensuring compliance with health and safety standards is often an important one.”

## **Everyone's priority**

The nations that we have cited so far have one thing in common - they are relatively rich, relatively mature industrial economies.

But while these countries may have most of the wealth, they don't have most of the workers. Workers outside of rich industrialized nations are part of the same world of work, and what happens to them impacts on the working conditions of every worker, everywhere.

The New York-based Labor Institute warns that spiralling stress and a downward pressure on pay and conditions can be traced to the "four horsemen of the workplace": downsizing, globalization, automation and an increase in the use of temporary workers.

The merger mania, takeovers, economic restructuring, globalization and lean and mean production methods of the new century are already putting workers through the economic blender, with employers switching from a "take it or leave it" approach to job negotiations, to a "take it, or we leave you" stance, with a border hop to the next, more accommodating, nation.

*Hazards* magazine reported in 2000: "The effects of globalization are hurting everywhere, with companies unaccountable to national governments on labour and safety standards. Multinationals like Rio Tinto, Cape, Thor and Union Carbide pocket the profits in one country, and leave a trail of workplace abuse and disease in another."

Look at Cape and Union Carbide. UK multinational Cape plc continued mining asbestos in the South African town of Prieska after it decided the combination of UK labour and asbestos disease compensation costs was too much to bear. A five-year legal battle ended this year, with a compensation settlement of UK£21 million agreed for the 7,500 sick, dying and bereaved claimants. For multinational Cape, the maximum price for a South African life is £5,250.

For Union Carbide, life came cheaper still. In the eighteen years since its pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, exploded only 14,824 related deaths have been compensated at a price per corpse averaging £900. Over 400,000 claims have been rejected.

The union effect, though, is apparent everywhere there are workplace hazards to challenge. Take South Africa. The mineworkers' union NUM was a driving force behind the Cape compensation campaign.

And a formal enquiry into the dangerous behaviour of the Swiss-owned Vantech company in Mpumalanga also came about as a result of a campaign by NUM. The union revealed that Swiss company Xstrata's Vantech operation was poisoning workers with vanadium; the company would not provide the union with medical records of workers who had allegedly died of vanadium poisoning.

### **Good business?**

Wherever people live and work, it is clear that what is good for business isn't necessarily good for workers.

Unions have fought for and won safety laws and employment protection, but the union safety effect, evident worldwide, shows that it is the presence of informed and active unions that give the laws meaning.

There's no single right way to do it. To secure improvements, unions have used methods from dialogue to strike action, ethical trading initiatives to alliances with environmental and human rights groups.

There are, however, prevailing management methods that are undoubtedly and dangerously the wrong way. "Enronomics," the sharp practices that allowed US energy giant Enron to pay its directors millions while plundering the pensions of its entire

workforce and destroying the company, is an extreme case of a common workplace disease.

Enron was aided by accounting consultant Arthur Andersen, the company that should have spotted the millions going missing. If you now have concerns about trusting your livelihood to an accountant, you should consider this – for millions of workers, the same accounting firms may be overseeing their lives.

The big five accountants – Arthur Andersen, KPMG, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Ernst and Young, and Deloitte & Touche – having a growing influence on working conditions, as “independent” auditors of corporate “ethical trading.”

A report this year in *Ethical Consumer* magazine presents evidence that safety, environment and labour rights abuses can be as easily ignored as financial misdemeanours.

It need not be this way. The 26 January 2002 edition of the *Focus on the Corporation* column puts the case for an end to “unaccountable accounting.” It presents arguments for a new Corporate Accountability Commission that would respect the accountants’ dictum “if you don't count it, it doesn't count” and would consider “intangibles and externalities” like real occupational injury costs.

“For example, when workers were injured, you wouldn't merely report the cost of the in-house nurse and the insurance, but you would also report the cost to the worker of loss of the leg, offset by any benefits you might provide to the worker,” it says.

In the modern, global world of work, companies like Enron, with well-paid friends in high places, can write their own rules.

Globalization and the shift in power from labour to capital that accompanies it could undermine the standards, legislation and employment protections that unions have won.

But it might also bring real meaning to labour slogans like “an injury to one is an injury to all.”

The struggle for better conditions now more than ever transcends borders and is one that can only be lost if constrained by parochialism and short-term self-interest. With over half of the world’s largest economies represented by multinational companies, not countries, international solidarity is, in every sense, a matter of survival for unions.

### **New approaches**

Unions are adapting to the new global realities, finding new ways of organizing that look beyond national borders. There are now in place a slew of company-based international agreements underpinning union rights, including safety and covering millions of workers worldwide.

In 1999, tyre and rubber unions from Goodyear plants in 16 countries on five continents, all affiliates of the international chemical, mining and energy union federation ICEM, formed a global union network with workplace health and safety as the group’s top priority. The unions agreed to create an international database on Goodyear’s operations and working conditions.

An ICEM “global agreement” with Norwegian-based oil multinational Statoil includes “a commitment to provide a safe and healthy work environment, deploying common 'best practice' standards.”

A similar ICEM agreement with the German multinational Freudenberg requires the company “to adhere to and continue to develop the required and necessary standards concerning occupational safety, health and environmental protection” wherever it operates. And a January 2002 agreement with Spanish power multinational Endesa again includes a commitment to respect trade union rights and high occupational health and safety standards.

The building and wood workers' international IFBWW has similar agreements with Swedish furniture giant IKEA, Skanska, pencil manufacturer Faber-Castell and construction company Hochtief; foodworkers' umbrella union IUF with French multinational Danone.

An agreement last year between IUF, a banana workers' union (COLSIBA) and the multinational Chiquita – a long time opponent of independent unions and notorious for its poor safety standards - guarantees core trade union and employment rights to banana workers.

Health and safety is also covered, with the agreement saying: "Chiquita acknowledges its responsibility to provide safe and healthy workplaces, and Chiquita and the IUF/COLSIBA agree to collaborate in efforts to further improve the health and safety of the Company's banana operations."

Unions too are increasingly finding common cause with environmental and human rights organizations.

The US-based International Right to Know Campaign, an environmental, labour and human rights coalition launched last year, "is not just about getting information to the United States but also about making sure that workers in foreign countries have basic information about their working conditions and their rights," says Elizabeth Drake of US union federation AFL-CIO.

And international union, religious and civil rights leaders have formed the BehindTheLabel.org anti-sweatshop coalition.

Unions are of necessity becoming more creative and more inclusive in their organizing methods, finding better ways to do their traditional organizing role, supplemented by lessons learned from environmental, anti-globalization and other emerging movements.

In a modern union world, blinkered self-interest amounts to a slow industrial suicide. Action at the workplace, national and international levels is the only thing that will work for the workers.

There's a new union survival plan. Forget *Think Global, Act Local*. Act now, act everywhere.

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[www.ifbww.org](http://www.ifbww.org) and [www.iuf.org](http://www.iuf.org)

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For more on Corporate Accountability Commission proposal, see [www.stakeholderalliance.org](http://www.stakeholderalliance.org)

## **Africa: Unions and integrated pest management**

Agricultural workers are acutely aware that chemical pesticides are bad for their health and that of their families and communities. “What are the alternatives?” and “How do we stop using these poisons?” are the questions asked most frequently at health and safety workshops in the sector.

One answer is to encourage workers through their unions to learn about and promote the use of non-chemical Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques and programmes for weed, insect pest, and disease control on the farms and plantations where they work.

The IUF is now working with the main international agency promoting IPM, the Global IPM Facility (a joint programme of the World Bank, FAO, UNDP and UNEP), to ensure that agricultural workers and their unions receive training in IPM using the FFS method.

At the end of May 2001, two week-long pilot IPM courses - the first ever for trade unionists - were held for IUF agricultural affiliates in Tanzania (TPAWU) and Uganda (NUPAW and NUCMAW). In total, some 40 workers were trained and will now be applying their new knowledge and skills back in the workplace to reduce pesticide use and improve health and safety standards.

### **India: Dockworkers address illegal imports of hazardous substances**

Educated and organized cargo handlers are a first line of protection against hazardous goods entering a country. When a Greenpeace report indicated that India had become a “hotspot” for illegal hazardous wastes imported under the pretext of “recycling”, the Port and Dockworkers (an ITF affiliate) decided to take on the issue with the assistance of the ILO ACTRAV, Workers’ Education and Environment Project.

Union safety committees joined with Indian groups, Toxic Links India, Shristi, and Greenpeace, to contact the agencies responsible for dock safety. Extensive research was conducted on the imports, especially in minor ports where protective legislation does not apply, and materials were prepared for safety committees and union members. Training materials were drawn up and a workshop was held in 1999 to train a network of union educators on issues surrounding toxic waste and its handling.

The Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), a national union centre, has produced a briefing document. Widespread publicity and a broad-based support have already resulted in stricter enforcement of existing standards on hazardous cargo.

*From: ICFTU briefing document for the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, April 2001*

### **Brazil: Unions take on benzene cancer**

Negotiations between Brazil's chemical industry and trade unions have produced an unprecedented agreement that provides detailed guidelines and procedures for the environmental control of benzene, involving full participation of workers and their unions.

The 1995 "Benzene Accord" defines benzene as a carcinogen and sets maximum workplace exposure standards. Workers have equal representation on a Permanent National Commission on Benzene to oversee developments, monitor compliance, promote studies, supplement laws and regulations, provide for alternative control measures and issue Certificates for the Controlled Use of Benzene.

The Accord is administered at the plant level by a Representative Group of Benzene Workers (GTP) which has full responsibility for programmes, including worker training. Full employer co-operation with the GTP is required, including access to information and records and provision of office and equipment, and heavy penalties are provided for violations.

*Information: Nilton Freitas, health, safety and environment officer, Brazilian CUT.*

**Global: Unions protect decent standards**

Moves by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to set up a health and safety management system without union input were quashed in 2000 by the first-ever internet health and safety campaign waged by the international trade union movement.

Unions felt that the union influence on safety would have been lost. They felt the International Labour Organization was the appropriate body to introduce a standard, because unlike ISO, ILO gives workers a voice as well as employers.

Lobbying across 80 countries by the global union health and safety network of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) succeeded in securing enough votes to block the ISO move.