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Organizing for Safe Work in a Safe World

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Organizing for Safe Work in a Safe World

Abstract

[Excerpt] Health and safety is a promising issue for organizing workers, whether as new members or in revitalizing local unions.

Working conditions have dramatically deteriorated over the past decade, and millions of workers now work in workplaces that are unbelievably dangerous and unhealthy.

There are many different organizing strategies. The authors start from the premise that from day one the goal of any organizing campaign is union building. Recognizing that there are different ways to get there, and that resources and circumstances differ from campaign to campaign, we attempt in this article to outline the basic ingredients and a general strategic approach. While our focus here is on organizing new members, the general approach we outline is equally effective for union building in already constituted local unions.

Keywords

health, safety, union organizing, working conditions



Overview

Organizing for Safe Work in a Safe World

■ *Diane Factor & Joe Uehlein*

Health and safety is a promising issue for organizing workers, whether as new members or in revitalizing local unions.

Working conditions have dramatically deteriorated over the past decade, and millions of workers now work in workplaces that are unbelievably dangerous and unhealthy.

But terrible conditions won't organize workers by themselves. Unions have to develop a clear understanding of the health and safety problems in specific workplaces. They have to systematically document those problems. And then they have to know their rights, use workers' direct action, and work with the government agencies that enforce environmental and health laws to put pressure on employers to correct the problems.

None of this is easy, but when it's done right, unions can build armies of rank-and-file workers who can begin to have some impact on the deplorable conditions employers are willing to subject them to. At the same time, once an "army" is built, it can take on a variety of enemies. Health and safety organizing is a way to build strong unions. Building strong unions is a way—the only way, when all is said and done—to ensure a safe and healthy

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workplace.

When is it "done right?" The articles by Linda Cromer of the RWDSU and Danny Perez of the ILG in this issue of *Labor Research Review* illustrate ways to do it right. This article will attempt to trace a generalized pattern of health and safety organizing that works based on the accumulated experience of a variety of unions.

Nearly two years ago, the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department (IUD) formed a staff-level committee of Organizing Directors and Health & Safety Directors of affiliated unions. Through the interaction of these union professionals, health-and-safety directors learned more about organizing, and organizing directors deepened their understanding of the technical, scientific—and bureaucratic, legal and political—aspects of occupational safety and health.

Out of this process, the IUD and the AFL-CIO conducted two conferences and produced a manual designed to help organizers better address safety, health and environmental issues and to help health-and-safety activists organize strong unions. This article is a summary version of that manual.

There are many different organizing strategies. The authors start from the premise that from day one the goal of any organizing campaign is union building. Recognizing that there are different ways to get there, and that resources and circumstances differ from campaign to campaign, we attempt in this article to outline the basic ingredients and a general strategic approach. While our focus here is on organizing new members, the general approach we outline is equally effective for union building in already constituted local unions.

An Issue that Hits Home

Public opinion polls and focus group discussions conducted recently by the IUD show that health-related issues (health insurance or health and safety on the job) rank as top concerns of both workers and the general public. A 1988 Roper Poll conducted for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) showed that health and safety at work is one of the greatest *environmental* concerns of the general public. And according to focus group research commissioned by the IUD, the general public is more sympathetic to strikes when health and safety issues are involved.

All our evidence shows that there is deep and widespread concern about health and safety on the job. But that doesn't mean unions can wait for workers to call them in to organize.

There are many reasons workers do not raise health and safety concerns. Fear and pain are not easy to talk about. No one likes to admit that they are vulnerable, weak or sick. Frustration, cynicism and denial often cover up feelings of helplessness and rage. Many workers know that poor working conditions may be harming their health, but they accept it as just part of the job. Sometimes they just don't make the connection between a particular chemical and the reason they're sick. Often workers suspect a problem, but don't think there is anything they can do to correct the problem. In general, there is a resignation that nothing can be done.

Health and safety organizing presents the organizer—whether organizing a nonunion workplace or revitalizing a union one—with a daunting set of tasks. *The organizer's job is to awaken interest in health and safety, make connections between hazard and health, and show workers that the union can be a vehicle to improve workplace conditions.* Through this effort, workers will learn about the resources a union offers, how a union functions and that a union can be effective.

Health and safety is a labor issue that interests both the community and the media, providing opportunities for the union to be portrayed in a positive light. The union can be cast as the watchdog, preventing environmental contamination and looking out for the community as well as the workers. Small victories can be won along the way to the union's goal. Through small victories, the organizer and the union gain credibility, workers become more involved, and workplace conditions improve.

Using safety and health issues requires a strategy that keeps in mind that these are powerful and emotional issues. The union cannot raise the specter of toxic exposure or increased risk to disease without having a plan for help that is realistic and feasible. Winning health and safety gains can inspire gratitude and loyalty. But not delivering on health and safety problems after expectations have been raised can engender disappointment and distrust.

Gathering Information as Organizing

Effective health-and-safety organizing requires detailed and sophisticated knowledge of the specific hazards in a workplace. But surveying the workers to gather information about hazards is itself a primary organizing activity.

It is a nearly universal truth that the key to any organizing strategy is the development of a strong and active workplace committee. Such a committee can be established around any issue or

set of issues that's of concern to the workers. For a traditional organizing committee, the primary activity is to talk with workers about joining the union, or at least signing a card petitioning for a representation election. In organizing around health and safety, the Organizing Committee's primary activity is to talk to workers about the health and safety hazards in their particular work areas.

Using One-on-One Canvassing techniques, a survey questionnaire is drawn up and the Organizing Committee's first activity is to recruit and train workers to administer the survey. In a workplace of 100 people, 10 canvassers would each talk to 10 people about hazards in their area; in a workplace of 1,000, you'd need 50 to 70 canvassers to talk to 15 or 20 workers each. The results of these one-on-one, worker-to-worker contacts are forwarded through the completed survey forms to the Organizing Committee.

However it is done, three valuable things result from this One-on-One Canvassing: 1) a mountain of shopfloor health-and-safety information is accumulated; 2) each worker is personally contacted by a fellow worker representing the union, giving the union a presence throughout the workplace; and 3) the canvassers themselves become a leadership pool, as many get more and more deeply involved in the union and its health-and-safety activities.

Building a One-on-One Canvassing structure may seem like a lot of work to gather more information than you can handle. But once built, the structure itself forms a union organization in the workplace that can be used to communicate with and solicit action from the workers on any number of issues.*

Identifying and correcting hazardous conditions is a collective effort. The primary source of information about unhealthy conditions is the workers themselves. Asking the right questions, identifying hazards that exist and documenting the dangers can be a fruitful collective activity that lays the groundwork for a successful health and safety campaign.

Secondary information comes from government records of reports, investigations, violations and toxic emissions that are available under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and other laws and agency requirements. Compiling and analyzing this information is a rewarding task involving workers in a workplace Organizing Committee.

*For information about getting One-on-One training for your union, contact the AFL-CIO Education Department, 815 16th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Also relevant is the IUD's manual, *The Inside Game: Winning With Workplace Strategies*, available from the Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, same address.



Technical expertise is usually required to develop surveys and help decipher government documents. In addition to international union health and safety experts, among the best sources of technical assistance are local Committees on Occupational Safety and Health (COSHes), which exist in 25 cities around the country. COSH groups are coalitions of enlightened health professionals and union health-and-safety activists. There is also a network of worker health clinics and university-based programs, including labor education programs, that may assist the union. These local groups, in addition to national union health-and-safety staff, can play a role in understanding technical issues, training workers in recognizing and documenting hazards, and strategizing about how best to use this information.

One way to gather workers' perceptions of hazards is by using the One-on-One system to interview workers who have been hurt on the job. Information from these interviews can be compiled to show statistically the frequency of injuries and health complaints. This information can then be compared to the company's records of injuries and illnesses to find out if the company is maintaining accurate records or may be trying to hide a problem.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires that employers collect and maintain certain records. Most employers are required (by OSHA Standard 29 CFR 1904.7) to maintain a Log 200, a complete listing of all injuries and illnesses

that result in death, lost work days, medical treatment, loss of consciousness, or job restriction or transfer. The Log 200 must be posted every year in February and must be made available upon request to workers and their union. Failure to accurately report an incident on the Log is an OSHA violation and has led to million-dollar fines in cases where companies have failed to record multiple incidents.

In the case of Iowa Beef Processors (IBP), for example, the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) suspected the company was maintaining two sets of books—one a "sanitized" log to show OSHA inspectors to hopefully exempt IBP from in-plant inspections. After conducting one-on-one surveys with injured workers, union reps compared their findings with the company logs. The conflicting logs and the high number of workplace injuries eventually led to Congressional oversight hearings, where Congressman Tom Lantos (D-California) accused two corporate witnesses of "doctoring" company logs. This exposé resulted in OSHA conducting more thorough in-plant investigations, cracking down on companies that fail to accurately maintain Log 200s, and rescinding its inspection-exemption policy.

Employers are also required under OSHA (Standard 29 CFR 1910.20) to allow workers and the union to have access to any health and safety records the employer keeps, including any exposure monitoring and medical records. Under the Right-to-Know law (Hazard Communication Standard 20 CFR 1910.1200), employers must provide Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) that contain health information about any potentially hazardous substance used in the workplace.

Requesting certain types of information from the company, such as the Log 200 or MSDSs, can itself be a cause for collective action. If the company refuses, the word can be put out through the one-on-one structure that a short meeting will take place at the plant gate immediately following the shift to discuss the next step. A continually building campaign of action and pressure ensues to force the company to obey the law. When the company finally complies, the word spreads through the plant and the union plans a celebration. Through forcing the company to comply, the union wins credibility and the workers get a sense of empowerment.

Risk Mapping

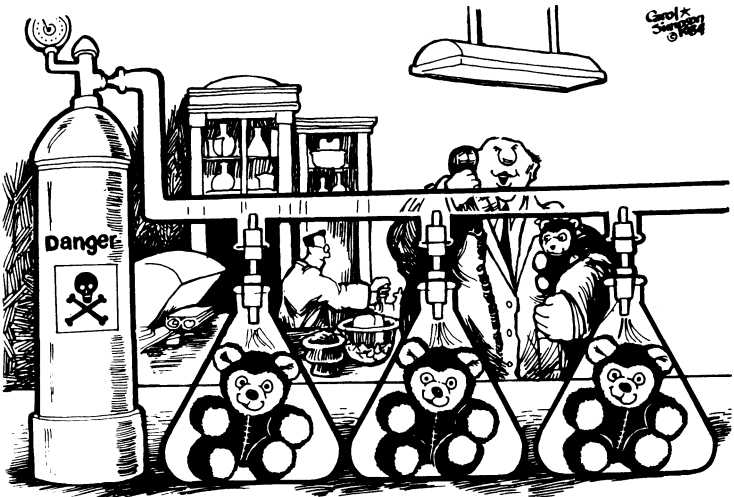
How to keep track of the mountains of data that result from surveying workplace hazards? Health-and-safety activists in Mexico City have developed a technique known as "risk mapping"

that serves this purpose. Risk mapping can be used as a committee-building technique or as a complement to the One-on-One Canvass.

Risk mapping allows a group of workers to visualize and draw a picture of their worksite and the various hazards it contains. The worksite map might be a floor plan of a factory or a depiction of any workplace such as an airline terminal or a quarry. On the worksite map are placed variously colored dots or icons to show the locations of various kinds of hazards. The risk maps in Mexico resemble wall murals or paintings with colored renditions of equipment and setting. Risk mapping exploits the ability to visualize and draw, and is not dependent on written or verbal skills.

Mapping is also a commonly used tool of union organizers who want to understand the layout of a workplace and where supporters and concentrations of workers are located. Risk mapping combines this organizer's tool with more detailed information about the location of specific hazards.

After drawing the layout of the workplace—including machinery, storage areas, work stations, exits, etc.—the mappers begin an imaginary walkthrough of the worksite to map the risks they've learned about through their One-on-One Canvass. Starting with physical hazards—noise, heat and cold, leaks, slippery floors, unguarded machinery, poor equipment design—the mappers use a distinctive color and symbols to pinpoint and name each physical



"The stuff's perfectly safe. We tested it on our animal subjects and none of them show any ill effects whatsoever!"

hazard. The mappers then use another color and different symbols to mark chemical hazards—dust, vapors, smoke, fumes, gas or mist. Mappers then go on to categorize hazards that may increase stress: work stations or departments where there is particularly bad supervision, speed up, forced overtime, lack of training, monotony or isolation.

When the map is completed, the concentration of color and frequency of a particular hazard indicates problems that concern many workers, and which might therefore be a good focus for action. The map creates a lasting document of what is going on in the workplace and visually shows what the priority issues are. Workers in one department can see that their problem is shared by others, or that others face problems more grave than their own.

In the course of mapping, the organizer may discover a problem that would be simple to correct and thus a good target for an immediate job action. Other concerns may require further research and investigation, such as what is in the paint that makes people feel queasy. After finding out what's in the paint from the MSDS, substituting a safer paint may become the number one priority for action.

Just as with the Mexican murals, these maps can be displayed in a meeting place as an ongoing record of hazards and a public testament of the health and safety campaign. The logs and records, the one-on-one survey and worker interviews, coupled with the risk map begin to paint a picture of the potential problems and provide documentation for further action.

Pressuring the Employer to Clean Up

This kind of elaborate information-gathering and systematic documentation is necessary if a union is to effectively exercise the legal protections the government is supposed to provide through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

First, OSHA is more likely to conduct a thorough investigation if workers can clearly document their problems. Second, the organizational structure built up through gathering and organizing the information develops a workplace organization and leadership to actively participate in the inspection and appeals procedures and to keep pressure on the company. Workers who recognize the hazards and know their rights help OSHA inspectors justify and prove violations. Finally, the pressure campaign further develops workplace organization and leadership.

The union can also work with the National Institute of Occupa-

tional Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The union also should seek community support and media attention, and it should directly call into question the actions of the company and its officers wherever possible.

The OSH Act clearly spells out that employers have the responsibility to maintain healthy and safe conditions. OSHA is the agency charged with seeing that employers carry out this responsibility. Since its inception in 1971, OSHA has not been able to develop the kind of tough enforcement and strong regulations necessary to enforce the act. During the Reagan Administration, OSHA took a real beating. Twenty-three states run their own OSHA program, reflecting the political situation in those particular states; but half the funding for state programs comes from the federal budget, so Reagan budget cuts affected those programs as well.

Despite this, some workers and unions have had successful results working with OSHA, obtaining worksite inspections that have resulted in citations and fines that help force employers to correct hazardous conditions. Most often OSHA only acts aggressively after a serious accident or workplace tragedy. Individual or spontaneous complaints do not usually result in timely or comprehensive inspections. Workers and their union representatives need to prepare well-documented complaints to target hazards that OSHA can effectively address. Workers must know their rights to participate and understand the limitations of OSHA's regulations and penalty structure. With realistic expectations and well thought-out preparation, however, OSHA inspections can produce useful results.

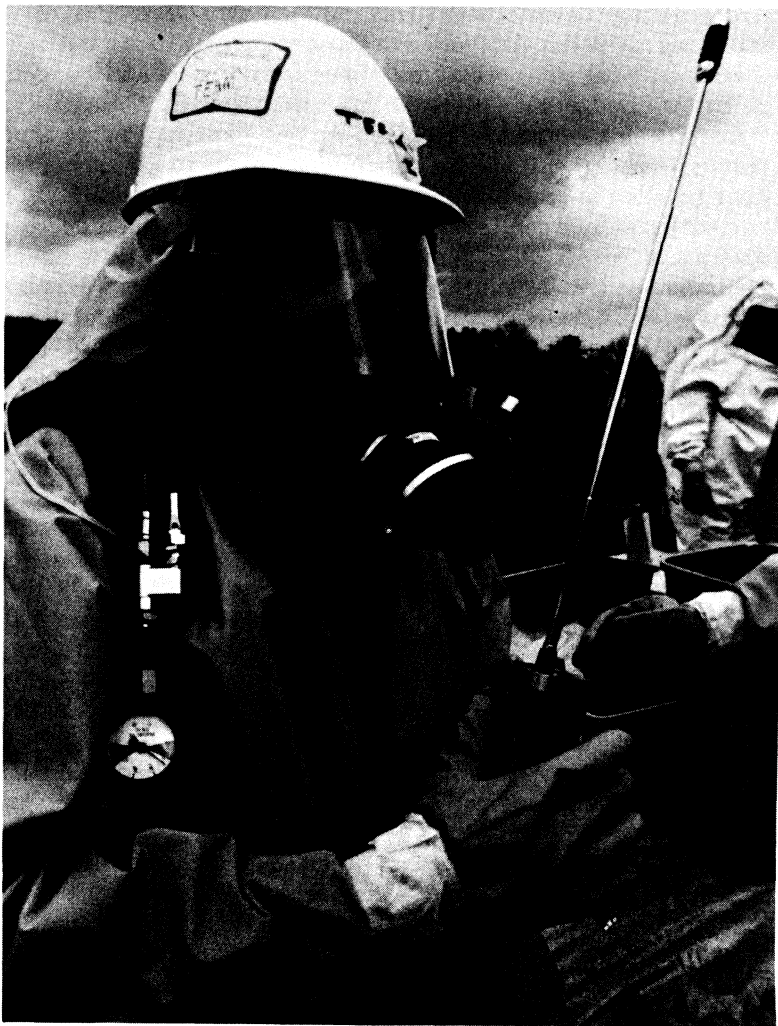
NIOSH is the other agency that directly concerns itself with occupational hazards. Its primary function is to research hazards and make regulatory recommendations to OSHA. NIOSH is valuable in that it can address new, unregulated hazards such as ergonomic problems and "tight building syndrome." Like OSHA, NIOSH has been severely underfunded in the last decade and is slow to respond and produce reports. Still, NIOSH will conduct in-plant inspections at the request of workers. Though its findings are only recommendations, a strong union organization can build pressure on an employer around a NIOSH inspection and its findings.

OSHA and NIOSH are the two agencies most directly involved in occupational hazards, but they are not necessarily the most effective in putting heat on a company that is contaminating both its workforce and the neighboring community.

Wherever feasible, the union should also try to involve the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or its state equivalent.

EPA can investigate allegations of illegal activities, and the fines it can levy for environmental violations are substantially higher than OSHA's. The General Electric plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, was fined only \$130 under OSHA when a worker cut his finger off in a machine where safety switches had been removed. But the EPA fined GE \$190,000 for not properly storing and labeling its oil and chemical waste.

A union pressure campaign can be much more effective if it can tap into community concerns about the environment. Cleaning



up conditions inside the plant is usually a first step in preventing contamination in the community. Workers, being pragmatic, want to find ways to eliminate hazardous conditions and don't see shutting down the company as an option. Dialogue between workers and community representatives can lead to finding mutually beneficial solutions to occupational and environmental health problems. Community support can give added ammunition to a union pressuring a company into cleaning up its act. The union can be seen not only as the watchdog, but as a source of positive solutions.

A union pressure campaign also has a better chance of being portrayed positively in the press if the issues are defined broadly to reflect environmental concerns that impact the community. Local politicians, district attorneys, religious and community leaders are more likely to play a role in an effort that is defined as involving health, safety and the environment. The portrayal of workers as only being interested in their jobs is recast as workers exercising their right to healthy conditions and using their knowledge to prevent unsafe practices by the company. Workplace hazards and injured workers can present powerful testimony to the community and help rally important external support.

It's important that any pressure campaign be built around a good power structure analysis of the company. The union needs to know *everything* about the company. Perhaps there's an environmentalist on the board of directors, or an academic or a church or community leader—all people who may be more vulnerable to attacks on the company over health, safety and environmental issues. Perhaps the company has been sued on environmental grounds or by workers at other facilities it owns. The company may be the subject of an EPA or OSHA investigation; workers and unions at other plants may know a great deal about this.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) monitors public corporations that sell stock, and it requires these companies to disclose certain information. The SEC is now beginning to require additional environmental information. Unions and community groups can act as important watchdogs to make sure that the company is complying and filing all important environmental information with the SEC.

Last year the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO launched a campaign called "Proxies for Health," whereby companies were chosen as targets for filing shareholder resolutions dealing with health, safety and environmental concerns. The resolutions specifically requested that a company's board of directors establish a subcommittee to deal with these issues.

*Dani Steele, Impact Visuals*

It's nearly unheard of that worker issues can be considered legitimate subjects for shareholder resolutions; they are almost always rejected by the SEC as matters of "ordinary business." But in this instance the worker issue, health and safety, links with external environmental issues, and the financial liability to a company for abusing the environment or worker health can indeed be quite significant. The argument is that this issue is so important, so potentially damaging to the company, that it cannot be left to management, that a director-level focus is required.

Prior to 1990 these issues were absent from shareholder proxies. But this year they represented one of the most active areas of shareholder concern. Admittedly, the shareholder approach represents a much longer term strategy than is affordable in many organizing drives. However, it is a thoroughly acceptable union-building strategy. It positions the union to act in nontraditional arenas, to be a player in what has been solely reserved to management. Attempting to bring pressure on management through its board of directors and the company's shareholders is an equivalent of the divide-and-conquer strategy management has long used against workers. It's important for workers to know that they have external arenas available to them for leveraging pressure.

Whether it's through government agencies, community campaigns, workers' direct action or pressure on management through boards of directors and shareholders, the idea of a pressure campaign is to put as much pressure on management in as many different places as possible.

Conclusion

"Safe Work in a Safe World" was the theme of the 1988 World Congress of the Brussels-based International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions (ICEF). That theme represents a recognition that unions everywhere must do more to organize for a safer and healthier workplace and community environment. It highlights the linkage between workplace and community contamination. When the workplace is polluted, it's quite likely that pollutants are released into surrounding communities also. Similarly, when communities recognize a pollution problem and identify the source, you can bet the workers in the plant are also exposed. Solving these problems requires that unions organize around immediate worksite issues, while at the same time forming linkages with groups in the community to solve external pollution problems.

But this won't happen simply because we believe it should. These are complex problems that require difficult nuts-and-bolts organizing. The complexity stems from the fact that these problems are scientific and technical in nature and demand a high level of information gathering and analysis followed by a program of action designed to apply appropriate pressures on the employer.

Whether you're involved in an aggressive "hot shop" campaign designed to begin and end within 60 days or a more deliberate long-term program, the elements described in this article can be employed. Power structure analysis can begin immediately so that certain of the employer's vulnerabilities are identified and can be exploited at the right moment. Internal organizing structures can be developed and shopfloor issues identified from the start. An organizer can always be alert for community support organizations and external issues that may connect with the workforce.

Empowerment takes place when workers act in concert to address particular problems. Even in a case where an organizer goes from initial contact to an NLRB election within 60 days, and wins, and then achieves a first contract within the next 90 days (a rare occurrence now)—the union will only prosper if it is powerful enough to keep the company at bay. Union-building does not stop with the achievement of a first contract. Longer term approaches help build a powerful union, and safety, health and environmental issues help build strong and effective unions. ■