



Health and Safety in the USWA

Members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) need safe and healthy work conditions. They and their families deserve a clean environment. That's why the USWA has a strong health and safety program.

The most important health, safety and environmental activists in the USWA are the more than 5,000 elected and appointed members of local union committees. They are backed by local union officers, staff representatives, and district safety and health coordinators. The international headquarters in Pittsburgh, and the Canadian national office in Toronto, have health and safety specialists on staff. The staff's job in the USWA Health, Safety and Environment Department is to help them. We do this by:

- Conducting education and training programs for local union committees, officers and staff representatives.
- Directly assisting local unions with health, safety or environmental problems.
- Working for better government standards and regulations.
- Helping to negotiate health, safety and environmental language in steelworker contracts.
- Coordinating the union's health, safety and environmental efforts with the AFL-CIO, CLC, other unions, and worldwide labor bodies.

Safer working conditions have always been a goal of unions. Early steelworkers knew how the 87-hour week destroyed their health and increased the accident rate. Opposition to those killing hours helped spark the great steel strike of 1919. That strike, and others like it, led the way toward modern industrial unions. Without such unions health and safety laws in the United States and Canada would never have been passed.

When we provide training for local union health and safety representatives, we often start by asking the question, "**Why is the union involved**

with health and safety?" The answers to this question almost always include:

- To eliminate hazards.
- To make sure that workers are not injured or made sick.
- To build the union.

We also ask workers, "**Why is management involved with health and safety?"** Again the answers that workers give are similar. They include:

- To reduce their costs.
- To improve productivity and competitiveness.
- To comply with government regulations.



What we take from this exercise is that our members and our union are involved with health and safety because we care about our lives and the lives of our co-workers. Our members also know that the union can make a difference and play an important role in improving working conditions not only in our plants, but also in workplaces across North America and around the world. On the other hand, our members believe that management is involved with health and safety to save money and keep out of trouble. This does not mean that individual management representatives don't care about workers at their workplace, but that our members believe that management as a whole is involved with health and safety because of their concern about the bottom line.

The USWA has a good working relationship with many employers. But sometimes we must fight for the rights of our members. A good example of this is the USWA's long term support of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) effort to issue an ergonomics rule. After a decade of struggle, workers in this country finally won protections to prevent crippling repetitive strain injuries, the nation's biggest job safety problem. OSHA's ergonomics standard was issued in November 2000 and went into effect on January 16, 2001. This important worker safeguard would have prevented hundreds of thousands of injuries a year by requiring employers to implement ergonomics programs and fix jobs where musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) occur.



With President Bush in office, the same big business groups and anti-worker members of Congress who campaigned to block the ergonomics standard, took their first opportunity to take it away. In just 24 hours of consideration, without even a single hearing, the Republican-controlled Congress voted to overturn OSHA's ergonomics standard. In his first major legislative action, on March 20, 2001, President Bush signed this harmful legislation killing this important worker protection.

Despite this major setback, our fight to protect workers from crippling workplace injuries must continue. Only a handful of USWA employers openly opposed the OSHA ergonomic standard, but employer associations like the American Iron and Steel Institute and the Rubber Manufacturers Association played key roles in the campaign to stop OSHA. These associations' membership include many of our employers.

In 1992 the Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia began work on an ergonomics standard to cover workers in that province of Canada. Employers' resistance to this regulation was very similar to what we saw in the U.S. An ergonomics standard is in place in British Columbia today, but industry's fears have not materialized.

Our message to all USWA employers is – If you're not with us, you're against us!

The union's ultimate objective must be to give workers increased control over their own working conditions and the hazards they face every day. The right-to-know about workplace hazards is meaningless without the power-to-act in defense of health and safety and to refuse unsafe work without fear of repercussions from management.

The USWA will continue to improve its ability to handle local union safety and health problems, negotiate better contract language, fight for stronger laws and regulations, and work to elect politicians who will support worker protection. Safety and health is not just a technical issue. It requires hard work in collective bargaining and the political process.



USWA members work in every kind of environment, from steel mills to hospitals, from underground mines to tire plants, from chemical facilities to public utilities. Every workplace has its hazards. But every workplace can be made safe. A strong local union safety and health program that focuses on eliminating hazards and correcting unsafe conditions can make the difference.

In a legal sense, safety and health are the responsibility of management. They operate the facility; they are expected to maintain good working conditions. But safety and health are too important to leave to management alone. Under the law, unions like the USWA have the right to represent their members on "conditions of employment." The most important conditions of employment are safety and health on the job.