

## 'Death on the Job'

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*Death on the Job — Occupational health and safety struggles in the USA. Daniel M. Bergman, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1978, 2 pp. 12.95 dollars*

The movement for awareness about occupational health and safety is still in its infancy in India. Trade union activists and social workers involved in welfare projects for industrial workers will be mollified by knowing that even in what is probably one of the most unionised countries in the world, the movement has still not caught on in a big way. Occupational health and safety struggles have still a long way to go before they make a dent in governmental and industrial circles.

Daniel M. Bergman in his book "Death on the Job", which deals with occupational health and safety struggles in the USA, states that despite the passage of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) as a consequence of widespread social discontent in the 1960's, major changes still remain to be achieved. "Violence against the spirits and bodies of workers continues".

The author states that business has been forced to deal with issues of occupational safety and health under two different sets of conditions, during war imposed labour shortages and during periods of severe social upheaval. When labour is extremely scarce, employers worry about preserving the labour they control by making the work more attractive. During times of severe social unrest workers demand better conditions. In both cases business tries to jump ahead of the workers and create institutions which define the problems of health and safety in non-threatening ways and take the sting out of the workers' unrest. Bergman speculates that perhaps the new occupational health and safety movement arose during an epoch that combined labour shortages and widespread protest against the unpopular war in Vietnam.

Tracing the history of the movement, the book deals with the manner in which the early twentieth century US corporations responded to concern about work accidents by setting up a business controlled compensation safety apparatus which held down compensation costs and did little to improve working conditions. This apparatus was able to exclude the issue of occupational health and safety from open debate until the late 1960's through its control of research, education, workers

compensation, governmental appointments and by creating the public impression that health problems in the workplace were non-existent. As a result, the pain and bloodshed and nearly all the money for the costs of work-related diseases and injuries are still borne by workers and their families, and the public at large. That way, says Bergman, it's cheaper for the industry.

With the exception of the United Mine Workers' activities and sporadic local uprisings, unions have been seriously involved in health and safety only in the last decade since they mobilised to pass the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. The OSHA law says Bergman, was made possible because of a tight labour market, worker dissatisfaction, the new environmental consciousness, the aid of progressive professionals and a climate of social unrest in the USA.

Bergman, while giving reasons for the lax safety standards in the industrial sector, pinpoints the political-economic context of industrial safety at the turn of the century. The rapid industrialisation of the United States produced a multitude of new dangers for workers. Big business, unable to control ruinous competition and confronting a militant working class and a growing socialist movement, sought the aid of the federal government. The fruits of fabulous productivity increases were gradually concentrated in fewer hands, symbolised in 1901 by the organisation of the United States Steel Corporation, the nation's first billion dollar business. As a result the competitive sector i.e. independent farmers and small businesses, were squeezed by the relentless advance of big business allied to the banks. Smaller manufacturers, unable to raise prices easily violently fought unionisation, while few leaders from the monopoly sector began to devise sophisticated methods to forestall unionisation through token welfare policies.

Meanwhile, by the end of the nineteenth century large corporations and sweatshops began employing millions of hopeful immigrants in dirty jobs that still paid better than peasant work in Southern and Eastern Europe. Giant corporations, led by the railroads, usually learned to use regulatory commissions

to consolidate their control of markets and public opinion. The Congress and the Presidency were finally secured for big business by the elections of William McKinley in 1896 over the ragtag Democratic-Populist coalition. Labour, beaten badly in a series of strikes in the late 1880's was on ascendancy in 1900 but unions made little progress in organising the new mass-production industries. A 1904 report in the labour press estimated that 27,000 workers were killed on the job each year, and a 1907 Bureau of Labour report put the annual death toll at 15,000 to 17,000 of 26 million male workers. Women's work was low paid and sometimes more dangerous.

Even though there were unions fighting the issue of workers compensation the odds were stacked against the workers right from the beginning. By 1908 workers' compensation and job accidents had become major items on corporate agendas. Existing common law doctrines made it impossible for workers to collect damages for injuries suffered on the job because the worker had to prove the employer was at fault. This was particularly difficult for severely injured workers to collect damages for injuries suffered or for workers killed on the job whose relatives had to depend on the testimony of supervisors and co-workers who could be bought under employer pressure.

Though workers' compensation became a major theme by 1920 occupational diseases however never merited much attention in either the model or actual laws, and so they remained as they were till the late 1960's. Till then the workers compensation systems and the unenforced industrial safety laws proved to be everything their corporate sponsors had hoped for. Both management and insurance interests benefited by the shift from chancy jury trials to administrative agencies whose employees could be bought off or coopted. Physicians were hired to deal with work injuries and to represent employers within the compensation bureaucracy, creating that peculiar institutional "ghetto" called industrial medicine.

Berman gives interesting details on what methods the big corporations adopted when they were dealing with workers who were organised. One such example is the case of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, a craft union, enrolling only skilled workers. The Amalgamated Association reached its height of power in the late 1890's and the Homestead, Pennsylvania, mill was its biggest locale. It was also the biggest mill of Carnegie Steel, the largest US steelmaker.

"At Homestead about 25 per cent of the 4,000 workers were in the union, where they controlled all aspects of production. This situation was unsatisfactory to Carnegie Steel for two reasons: according to the contract, workers got a constant share of the increasing sales of the mill, and they had the power to prevent the introduction of labour-saving technology if it did not suit them. Carnegie resolved to break the labour in a definitive test of strength. Before the contract expired in 1892, the management built a three mile long fence around the plant with shoulder level rifle holes every 25 feet. The workers were told that after June 24 the Carnegie would deal with them only as individuals. On July 2 most unionised workers were locked out. The union backed by all the workers responded by shutting down the mill renting a steam boat to patrol the Monongahela river, and organising the whole town for resistance. When bargeloads of three hundred armed Pinkerton men were brought to force the mill open and bring in scabs, an open gun battle resulted, sixteen were killed, including seven Pinkerton agents and the rest of the invaders surrendered to the workers and their families. But after a four month strike Carnegie won the Homestead war with the help of the Pennsylvania militia and the plant resumed production without a union. Loss of its most important outpost was the beginning of a rapid decline for the Association. After a disastrous strike in 1902, the union was completely uprooted from the steel industry".

In 1910, U.S. Steel inaugurated the Voluntary Accident Relief Plan, based on models developed in Bismarkian Germany by a conservative capitalist class under challenge from the fastest growing socialist movement in Europe. The programme, soon superseded by the state workers compensation laws, was the first of its kind in the USA and paid workers or their families fixed amounts for job-related injuries causing disability and death. The plan for all its purported liberality stated explicitly: "No relief will be paid to any employee or his family if suit is brought against the company" and workers who received relief were required to sign away any further rights to sue U.S. steel. This became the model for the rest of the USA.

The compensation safety apparatus is the complex of mostly private, corporate-dominated organisations which are concerned with compensation, workplace inspection, standard-setting, research, and education in occupational health and safety. It is called the compensation-safety apparatus because it emphasises compensation over prevention



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and safety over health in its activities. It is an apparatus because it has executed the policies of only business and insurance interests for decades as the organised constituency in occupational safety and health. Only in the last ten years has its dominance been challenged by workers, unions and their progressive allies.

Serious attack on the compensation-safety apparatus began in the late 1960's in the coal mines, over issues of black lung. The issue was taken up by workers in industries all over the USA. President Nixon finally signed the Occupational Safety Health Act of 1970. The law, says Berman, promises more than it delivers. However from this step onward things begin to change and various unions take up the issue of occupational health on a larger scale. Berman goes into details about the conditions of work in the oil, chemical, rubber and atomic industries and the way in which their respective unions tackle the problem of occupational safety. Interesting details emerge of the lifestyles of some of the Ame-

rican labour leaders. Referring to the largest union in the USA the "Teamsters" Berman states that "Top Teamster officials live royally on the members fees. Five jet aircraft and two turboprops worth over 13 million, dollars and costing over 2 million dollars annually, fly the top leadership to its missions. Frank E. Fitzsimmons, general president, receives an annual salary of 156,000 dollars and a host of other benefits, and Harold Friedman, president of Bakers Local 19, a Cleveland local associated with Teamsters, received the astonishing total of 352,330 dollars from his various union jobs in 1976. Compared with their leaders lifestyle the Teamsters efforts in health and safety are decidedly meagre".

There is also a chapter on the future politics of working conditions and Berman says that with the coming of more and more automation the future worker will suffer more from stress hazards as compared with the worker of today. The book contains useful tables and statistical information about the compensation apparatus in the USA.

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*(Contd. from page 129)*

already poor health due to the vicious cycle of disease and environment as already pointed out.

There are certain morbid conditions which are associated with the unphysiological posture while doing agricultural work, for examples while sowing paddy one has to stoop for hours together which results in backache. Postures during harvesting of wheat and rice are also uncomfortable and unphysiological giving rise to a variety of joint problems.

Lastly, there is a miscellaneous group of disorders to which agricultural workers are much more prone than the people at large. Sun stroke and heat stroke are quite common because of prolonged hours of work in the scorching heat. Ailments of the eye are also more common because of the harmful sun rays and dust falling on the unprotected eyes. Injuries to the eyes are also quite common because of the same reason. Agricultural workers are quite familiar with the bites of poisonous animals like snakes and scorpions etc. Prevalence of hookworm infestation is much higher than the general population because of their compulsion to work barefooted in the fields. Farmer's lung, hay fever, allergies of various types and fungal

infections of the skin are some of the other examples of morbidities which the agricultural labourers likely are to suffer from.

In the profit generating exploitative socio economic pattern of production human labour has been reduced to a mere commodity. Least concern is made for this perishable tool (the labour) in the race of maximum profits. The working conditions adversely affect the workers health and in some cases prove to be fatal.

Pale skinned, thin dyspnoic labourers working in chemicals and pesticides factories: Pneumoconiosis affected child labour in slate, lead, silicon industry convey the same story.

We have made an attempt to focus attention on the health hazards which the agricultural labour is exposed to. We hope that it will initiate a debate which will improve and enrich our understanding and contribute to the vital struggle for equality and justice.

**People's Health Group**  
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## Why don't you write for us ?

This periodical is a collective effort of many individuals active or interested in the field of health or interested in health issues. The chief aim of the journal is to provide a forum for exchange of ideas and for generating a debate on practical and theoretical issues in health from a **radical or marxist** perspective. We believe that only through such interaction can a coherent radical and marxist critique of health and health care be evolved.

Each issue of the journal will focus on one theme, but it will also carry (i) Discussions on articles published in earlier issues (ii) Commentaries, reports, shorter contributions outside the main theme.

Our forthcoming issues will focus on : Politics of Population Control, Health and Imperialism, People in Health care and Systems of Medicine.

If you wish to write on any of these issues do let us know immediately. We have to work three months ahead of the date of publication, which means that the issue on Politics of Population Control is already being worked on. A full length article should not exceed 6,000 words and the number of references in the article should not exceed 50. Unless otherwise stated author's names in the case of joint authorship will be printed in alphabetical order. You will appreciate that we have a broad editorial policy on the basis of which articles will be accepted.

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## Push Back the Catastrophes

I don't want a drought to feed on itself  
through the tattooed holes in my belly  
I don't want a spectacular desert of  
charred stems and rabbit hairs  
in my throat of accumulated matter  
I don't want to burn and cut through the forest  
like a greedy mercenary drilling into  
the sugar cane of the bones

Push back the advancing sands  
the polluted sewage  
the dust demons the dying timber  
the upper atmosphere of nitrogen  
push back the catastrophes

Enough of the missiles  
the submarines  
the aircraft carriers  
the biological weapons

No more sickness sadness poverty  
exploitation destabilization  
illiteracy and bombing

Let's move towards peace  
towards equality and justice  
that's what I want

To breathe clean air  
to drink pure water to plant new crops  
to soak up the rain to wash off the stink  
to hold this body and soul together in peace  
that's it

Push back the catastrophes

—Jayne Cortez (black woman poet)  
*(From: Coagulations: New and Selected Poems, 1984)*

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