

Workers' Health and Labour Militancy

gerald markowitz

The Struggle for Workers' Health: A Study of Six Industrialised Countries by Ray H Elling, Baywood Publishing Co, 1986, 500 pages; \$ 37.50.

US workers face a multitude of dangers on the job and the Reagan administration has been largely successful in hobbling the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and state regulatory efforts. This book puts the problem in an international perspective, with very disturbing results. Elling shows that even at its best, OSHA compares very poorly with other capitalist countries' occupational safety and health systems.

Elling uses a Marxist framework to analyse occupational safety and health (OSH) problems: "Most if not all OSH problems stem from the inequitable exploitation of relatively powerless workers engaged in producing value which is expropriated for the private use of a ruling elite," he states. Elling surveys the history and political economy of the countries he studies, and details the OSH system in each. The countries studied are the US, Britain, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland and Sweden.

Elling compares six elements in the countries' OSH systems: policy, sponsorship and control, education, organisation, information and financing. He concludes that Sweden and the GDR have developed the most comprehensive systems for protecting workers' health; Finland's system is somewhat less strong. Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany rank much lower, and the US offers workers the least protection, he concludes. While acknowledging that his conclusions are tentative, Elling's analysis is extremely useful for both activists and researchers.

Elling maintains the single biggest factor determining the quality of a country's OSH system is the strength of its workers' movement. In Sweden, for instance, 95-98 per cent of blue-collar workers are organised and 70-75 per cent of other workers are unionised. As a result, Sweden has developed a system that is light-years ahead of the US (where only 18 per cent of workers are unionised).

Swedish policy seeks to insure that employment is fitted to the health requirements of workers. Sweden's concept of health is also unusually broad, taking into consideration not only physical conditions but also the use of "piece work, shift work, incentive systems, and psychosocial factors related to physical and mental illness." For instance, Swedish research has shown that the degree of control workers have over their work affects their rate of coronary disease.

At the core of the Swedish system are 1,11,000 safety delegates elected through their unions. There must be a delegate in every plant with at least five employees. These delegates are empowered to interrupt work that poses an immediate or even long-range danger to workers. Every workplace with over 50 employees must have a joint labour-management safety committee in which workers are in the majority. The committee helps hire plant physicians and safety engineers. Sweden's system cannot even be compared to the US's non-system. Here, only workers who are represented by health and safety conscious unions like the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers can expect protection. Even so, Elling notes that Swedish workers are subject to some of the same pressures as those in the US. Even in Sweden, workers can be cowed by management threats to move or shut down in the event of costly health and safety demands.

Elling suggests that only a revived and militant labour movement can improve the US's abysmal health and safety system. But by describing what workers have won in other capitalist countries, Elling shows that the fruits of struggle can be crucial to workers' well-being.

Gerald Markowitz is coeditor of "Dying for Work" (Indiana University Press) and "Slaves of the Depression: Workers' Letters About Life On the Job" (Cornell University Press). Baywood Publishing Company is at Box D, 120 Marine St Farmingdale, NY 11735. Reprinted from *The Guardian* (US), August 8, 1987.

Systems Approach to Problem-Solving

Agencies Working Together: A Guide to Coordination and Planning by Robert Ross, Kevin Gilmartin and Charles Dayton, Sage Publications, 1982. Price \$ 7.95, pp 119.

THIS publication is part of the Sage Human Services Guides Series (Vol 28). It is an attempt at delineating various approaches to inter-agency coordination based on an actual study of such coordination in the state of California. With a spate of NGOs working in the field of 'human services' the need for effective communication and coordination between various agencies, so that they can help each other, also increases. In essence this book is a guide written for all sorts

of welfare and social service agencies. It discusses various methodologies and approaches 'tried out successfully' that can help build up effective inter-linkages between agencies in order to provide better services to their clientele.

The book is useful for those who feel that a systems approach solves most problems in management.

RD