



Fifteen Things Every Union Leader Should Know About Safety and Health

- 1) The twin goals of a union safety and health program are to improve working conditions and to build the union. They are equally important. In fact, you can't do either one well unless you do both.
- 2) Management has different goals for health and safety than the union does, even enlightened management. They may care about safety in its own right, but are probably more concerned about things like workers comp costs. And building the union is never one of management's goals.
- 3) What you do regularly with your employer on safety and health is a form of bargaining – called "continuous bargaining." Management comes in to joint labor-management health and safety committee meetings prepared to meet their goals; we need to come in just as prepared to meet our goals.
- 4) Safety and health isn't a technical issue. Technical knowledge helps. But there are plenty of places to get technical information. Strategy and organization are much more important in winning the improvements we need.
- 5) Every local union needs a union safety and health committee. You should set one up even if you don't have a joint safety and health committee. You don't need an employer's permission to establish a union committee.
- 6) It's also good to have a joint safety and health committee, with representatives from the union and from management. The joint committee can be important in resolving health and safety problems.
- 7) Even if you have a joint committee, you still need a union committee. The union committee can be the union reps on the joint committee or a larger group.

- 8) The union members of the joint committee should meet by themselves at least as often as they meet with management. You need separate meetings to set union priorities and plan strategy. Can you imagine what would happen if your bargaining committee met only with the employer at contract time, and never by itself?
- 9) You should never, ever allow the employer to appoint your safety and health reps, to veto the union's choices, or dismiss your reps from their union positions. Never. Ever.
- 10) Union safety and health reps should think of themselves as organizers, promoting health and safety in a way that builds the involvement – and the loyalty and commitment -- of your membership. That means involving the membership whenever you can in the union's health and safety activities. And it means good communication with your membership, both written and by word of mouth such as "one-on-one's".
- 11) Workers' injuries and illnesses are caused by exposure to hazards on the job. The hazards can be unsafe equipment or toxic chemicals. Hazards also include things like lack of training, fatigue from extended working hours and shifts, downsizing/understaffing, work overload (too few people, too much work, job combinations, etc.), and production pressures.
- 12) A good safety and health program focuses on finding and correcting hazards. Employers' safety programs that focus on "worker behavior," workers' "unsafe acts" and blaming workers are hazards in and of themselves. They focus attention away from the real hazards that put our members' health and lives at risk.
- 13) "Blame-the-worker" safety programs tell our members that they are the problem. In fact, our members and their union are the solution.
- 14) The best way to find hazards is for union health and safety reps to talk to every worker about his or her job, and how to make it safer, healthier and easier. It's even better to enlist that member in pushing for improvements. That helps build involvement of members in safety and health, and build the union!
- 15) You're not alone. You have lots of resources though the USW. Every district has a safety and health coordinator, and USW safety and health advisors. Our International's Health, Safety and Environment Department is available for help via phone (412-562-2581), fax (412-562-2584), email (safety@usw.org) or mail (USW Health, Safety and Environment Dept., United Steelworkers, 5 Gateway Center, Pittsburgh, PA 15222)