Safety First: NYCOSH's 30-Year Campaign Against Workplace Injury and Death

by Vernon Mogensen

The New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH) recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary as an organization committed to educating and training workers and lobbying on their behalf for better standards. Arguably the more successful and visible COSH groups to come out of the workers' safety and health movement of the 1960s, it has grown from a small informal group of activists meeting over brown bag lunches in the 1970s into a broadly based organization of workers, medical professionals, academics, and over 200 union affiliates.

NYCOSH provides technical assistance to unions, individuals, and the community on a wide range of issues including but not limited to the fallout from toxic c

OSHA reform, health care being one, Employee Free Choice Act, of course, being the second. NYCOSH has been engaged, as have the other Committees for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH) groups across the country, in attempting to build support among members of Congress to become cosponsors of the OSHA reform legislation, and many of the staffs have sort of said to us, "Come back later, after health care has passed, because we can't focus on anything but health care at this point in time."

The other question, of course, that I have not really heard injected into the health care debate is the whole issue of occupational safety and health and how passage of health care reform would impact upon both workers' compensation and prevention issues. Obama talks about the importance of prevention, but I've not heard anyone really talking about the savings that we could realize in our health care system through a program of preventing occupational disease and injuries.

Q: Along these lines, what are the prospects for the revival of the ergonomics standard that was repealed by the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress in 2001?

JS: Well, we held a briefing with Jordan Barab, the recently appointed Deputy Administrator for OSHA, or Acting Administrator for the Agency. And he was asked tha

state and country. And this always was a huge tension within the organization, because there were large numbers of workers who were unorganized, exposed to very real hazards that cried out to be addressed.

And so, for example, in 1986, when we first hired staff, many of those staff people were very concerned about office workers who were working on what we called then video display terminals, which we now call computer terminals. There was tremendous concern about both the radiation given off by the machine and the ergonomic hazards to which workers were exposed. And so the question we confronted at that point was, well, how do you reach out to unorganized workers and provide them with the information and training that they needed to make their workplaces safe, as opposed to dealing with those who were organized?

This problem continued throughout NYCOSH's history, and particularly in the '90s, when immigration issues became even greater than they are now, that issue forced NYCOSH to confront how we dealt with those workers who were not organized, immigrant workers who were non-documented. And this still is a major issue, because clearly these workers are doing the most dangerous, dirty work in our society, injured and killed at rates that are far in excess of the rest of the population.

And so I'd say in the late '90s, we began to change our focus to try and reach out to organizations that were providing services to unorganized workers. We still have problems, not that we don't provide services or training to immigrant workers, but it is very difficult for us, given our limited resources, to provide unorganized workers with the support that they need to deal with the hazards, because, as Tony Mazzocchi[i] used to say: workers who are unorganized who exercise their rights, will be immediately fired, and we couldn't protect them.

But we felt that if we began to work organizationally, provide training to groups that were organizing workers, that would be a much more efficient and reasonable use of our resources, and those groups could then use the issue to organize around. So, one of the major area

Q: What has been NYCOSH's major accomplishment over the last 30 years, and what frustrations or obstacles has it faced?

JS: I think that there are several major things that we have achieved. The first is that we have trained thousands of workers and raised consciousness among working people throughout the region about workplace safety and health hazards. We have been able to develop among the unions that are members of NYCOSH a sense that we

relationships. But in many cases, we would bring problems that were experienced by workers on the shop floor to the attention of, let's say, the doctors, the medical community. The medical community would come back with their research, that workers didn't understand. We served as their translators and made it accessible to

to understand the connection between exposure to toxic substances and health. And in New York in 1976, they started to hold brown bag lunches where people began to educate themselves and educate people within the

What saved our organization was the fact that we *didn't* get New Directions funding. So when Ronald Reagan came in and cut all that money, we were not adversely affected, since we didn't have any! At that point, NYCOSH had developed a booklet on the health hazards of video display terminals, and we sold that booklet for a dollar to literally tens of thousands of people across the world. I'm sort of digressing here from, I think, your question. But that booklet essentially funded NYCOSH as an organization from 1980 or 1981 to 1986, when the funding of the HAB came into play.

NYCOSH was one of about 25 COSH groups that developed in the mid to late 70s and early 80s.. Some, like CACOSH (Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health), were funded through the New Directions programs. Others had other sources of funding. They all were like little local city-states. They developed expertise in their type of hazards that the local economy—that they represented. So Western New York COSH at that point, in Buffalo, knew a lot about industrial solvents and about cranes and manufacturing that was done in the steel mills, which were still in existence at that point. NYCOSH became expert in indoor air and computer hazards. Other organizations in the South developed expertise in the hazards of raising chickens and producing chickens for market. There were groups out on the West Coast that became experts in the electronics industry. And so all of these groups developed various strategies for surviving that were independent of one another, and yet they overlapped.

Q: What was your educational background and how did you become interested in the issue of workers' safety and health? How did you come to join NYCOSH?

JS: Well, I came to New York—much against my will, frankly—but I had been involved in the organization of teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin, and I was a PhD candidate in colonial history. But because of my experience working in the organizing of teaching assistants, I got hired at Empire State College that had just been established in 1972 here in New York where I taught labor history.

In my training and in my teaching I met people in the labor movement who were involved in workplace safety and health, particularly people like Eric Frumin[iv] and Eddie Ott[v], all of whom were involved in safety and health in one way or another. In addition to Eddie and Eric, I had an amazing group of students: Dan Kane (now with the Vice-President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters); Denis Hughes (President of the NYS AFL-CIO), Joe Pascarella (who became President of Local 1-2 of RWDSU), Bill Nuchow (Business Manager of Local 840, IBT), Larry Jacobson (Chairman of the Joint Board of Local 3, IBEW) And so these students essentially educated me about workplace safety and health. I had students who were construction workers who took headers off buildings. A pesticide appli

basis, for which I was paid $100 a day, and I actually collected unemployment for the other four. I worked seven days a week to build the organization.

I was able to support myself in a crazy way. When I was at school, I got a fellowship that paid for me to go to night school and paid me a stipend. But I was looking for work during the day and couldn't find any, so I collected unemployment. I actually saved money, and I ran NYCOSH during that period of time. Luckily, I wasn't married or anything at that point, so I was able to support myself.

When NYCOSH began to figure out strategies for survival, we raised money through the sale of VDT books. We couldn't get money from foundations. We went to United Way, and they wouldn't give us money because they said my salary was too low, that I would not be able to stay there for any period of time on the salary that I was being paid. They thought we didn't have enough organizational wherewithal to keep the organization going.

United Way would come every year and campaign to raise money from the members of the Transport Workers Union. George Macdonald, who was Safety and Health Director of Local 100 of the Transit Workers Union was on our board of directors. One year a representative of United Way came into the union hall to distribute pledge cards, and George said, "I don't want you to come in here. You take your cards and leave." The United Way called later and asked, "George, why did you say that?" He said, "Well, you know, the organization I'm on the board of, NYCOSH, applied for money. You didn't give them any money."

So the next thing I knew, I got a call from United Way. They were giving us $25,000. And I was amazed. This was to do a subway campaign about workplace safety and health issues and about NYCOSH, and I was sort of stunned. As I hung up the phone and I thought, "They didn't say anything about how I was supposed to report that." So I called them back. I said, "You know, I'm really pleased that you're giving me $25,000. What are the reporting requirements?" They said, "Just take the money," you know? So we got the $25,000, and that helped us get through to 1986, where we got the state funding, and allowed us to hire staff.

Q: Speaking of students, I have heard some discussion that the worker safety and health movement that was ushered in during the baby boom generation is aging, and this, combined with the decline inume g00195(1)2

Q: *Dying for Work in New York* says that New York State, compared to the nation as a whole, has both a much higher percentage of unionized workers—24.9 percent in 2008 versus only 12.4 percent for the entire nation—and a lower rate of occupational fatalities. In your opinion, is this just a correlation, or is it due to the safety efforts of unions and COSH groups?

JS: You know, we can't make a clear connection, because we don't have the analytic tools. However, in the current issue of the American Public Health Association journal, there is an article that actually makes this correlation on a national basis, and they are able to show that in those areas of the country where you have higher union density, there is a lower incident and fatality rate. And so what we put in our report as an observation, we feel, has been backed up by a much more rigorous academic study.

Q: It is now eight years since the attack at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Mount Sinai Medical Center, which monitors the health of 9/11 rescue and recovery workers who breathed in the toxic brew of airborne

But our concern is that these green jobs aren't necessarily safe jobs. A lot of these jobs are traditional jobs being used for new purposes and they have some of the old hazards associated with them. Some are new jobs in new industries for which we don't know all of the hazards. If you just take the retrofitting of buildings, all sorts of hazards, from asbestos to lead to fall to electrical hazards, that workers are exposed to need to be addressed. Similarly, in the installation of solar panels, there are many different types of hazards that are associated with the production and installation of these of these technologies. So, you know, we need to proceed and provide training, and move into these alliances, but we can't forget that workplace hazards don't go away.

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Notes

[i] Longtime director of the Safety and Health Department at the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union who led the movement that resulted in the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.
[iii] A program started by Eula Bingham's OSHA in 1978 during the Carter Administration that provided grants to unions and COSH groups to pay for doctors and interns and safety training and education for workers.
[iv] Formerly the director of Unite HERE's safety and health program and now the director of the Change to Win coaliti