

Application ID #0029

More than 15 workers are killed every day on the job in America and a worker becomes injured or ill on the job every 2.5 seconds. The majority of deaths, injuries and illnesses could have been prevented had the employers provided a safe workplace and complied with federal regulations or other safe practices(1).

Since the 1900's began, organized labor has fought an uphill battle for some of the basic rights that many of today's union workers take for granted or don't fully understand. United Steelworkers Local 1010 was borne out of various labor associations and was firmly established in 1938. During contract negotiations with Inland Steel Co. in 1954, Local 1010 had a provision included in the contract which gave workers the right to refuse unsafe work. This provision, referred to as Article 14, Section 6 in the old Inland contract book, has saved the lives of many steelworkers since it was established (2). Since it was enacted in 1954, 98 members of Local 1010 have unfortunately lost their lives on the job, the most recent being in March of 2008 (3).

After many decades of looking the other way and not recognizing the need for a governing body to oversee workplace safety, the United States passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970. In 1971, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, was created to administer and enforce this new Act. The main intent of OSHA was to protect workers from harm on the job. This was the beginning of a new era in workplace safety (4). But it still is not enough.

In 2006, there were 5,840 workplace fatalities. In 2007, there were 5,657 workplace fatalities (5). Although there was a decrease in workplace fatalities, this is still not acceptable! Union memberships have been declining since 1980's. This does not

bode well for organized labor including steelworkers. America needs a strong union presence nationwide. It has been proven through countless government sponsored studies that unions make for safer workplaces. As our country struggles through our current economic crisis, millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of unionized workers stand to lose their right to a safe workplace as companies seek government aid in order to reinvent themselves. As I type this, over 1,500 of ArcelorMittal's unionized labor force will be losing their jobs due to plant closings or idling. That is 1500 or more individuals who will have to seek work with the many non-union facilities that are now in operation.

It has been almost one year since Union Tank Car closed its manufacturing facility in East Chicago. Over 500 union jobs were lost. Those jobs were sent to a newly built UTLX facility in Alexandria, Louisiana. The labor force at this facility is not represented by any organized labor union. Statistics from this shop are not yet available, but we can be sure that safety is not high on the agenda, if it is on the agenda at all.

I believe that safety is much like life itself. It is a journey and not as destination. It is everyone's responsibility to take their safety seriously and not for granted. Everyone can make their workplace a safer environment by being diligent and following established procedures and practices.

1. <http://spewingforth.blogspot.com/>
2. <http://www.post-trib.com/news/neighbors/1565514,steel.article>
3. <http://uswa1010.org/committees/safety/memorial/memorial.html>
4. <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/mono-oshal3introtoc.htm>
5. http://www.aflcio.org/issues/safety/memorial/upload/_02.pdf