

## Application form ID# 0023

Unions have been around for almost 200 years working to help protect the rights of the employees. By representing the workers, the unions want to provoke employers to provide a safe work environment, along with negotiating fair benefits and wages equally, for everyone.

With the unions pushing for safer workplaces, employers are offering better training in regards to health and safety rules. Union workplaces also will implement the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidelines. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 was the federal law ensuring safety in the workplace. This law was enacted due to the backing and work of the union.<sup>1</sup>

One example of improvements made in safety is when the United Food and Commercial Workers sued employers to provide personal protective equipment. In 2008 workers in hazardous jobs fought for personal protective equipment such as safety gear, hard hats, and protective glasses. These items of protection must be provided for by the employer, not the employees responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Another incident of improved safety is the Alabama Power and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). These two

organizations worked together to create a program called Target Zero. After implementing this plan, Alabama Power's reportable accidents have declined from 500 accidents per year to only 50 per year.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, the AFL-CIO is working on stronger penalties being imposed upon employers who violate current standards. When accidents occur which lead to injury or death of an employee, the penalties are not serious enough to make the employer correct the safety issue. Penalties have not been increased since 1990. This needs to change, to be more of an incentive to employers to make the workplace safer and put more of a value on the lives of the employees. Stiffer penalties would ensure that companies respected and followed the safety rules to protect their employees.<sup>2</sup>

Currently unions are addressing the swine flu epidemic. A union report stated that health care workers are at risk because medical facilities are not prepared to deal with this pandemic. OSHA does not have any standards at this time for dealing with airborne illnesses. They will be enforcing their general handling of safety requiring employers to provide gloves and specific respirators to protect against the spread of the infection. Employees also need to be trained on when and how to properly wear a respirator, and the proper way of putting on and removing safety equipment. All of this is vitally

important to the well being of the employee as well as the general public to prevent further spread of the disease.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) is working on behavior-based safety issues. This theory revolves around the idea that safety accidents are caused by unsafe acts. The USWA has proven that this idea is wrong, and the cause of accidents is hazards and unsafe conditions. Studies have proven that when these situations are corrected, the incidence of injuries have decreased. The goal of the USWA is to fix the job, not the worker!<sup>3</sup>

Safety in the workplace should be important to everyone, the employee as well as the employer. Unions help to back the employees with their support and their dedication to keeping safety and equality for all in the workplace.

<sup>1</sup>10 May 2009. <<http://www.americanrightsatwork.org>>

<sup>2</sup>Hall, Mike. 10 May 2009. <<http://www.blog.aflcio.org>>

<sup>3</sup>10 May 2009. <<http://www.aflcio.org>>