

A SAFE JOB IS YOUR RIGHT!

WORKERS understandably are interested in the issue of health and safety. As a worker you probably know of someone who was injured at work — perhaps it was something small but painful like a crushed finger. Or maybe it was more serious — like a broken arm. You may even know of another worker who was killed at work.

Why do so many of us know someone who was injured or even killed at work? The answer to that is this, it is because there are so many accidents in South African factories. In 1983 there were 311 648 industrial accidents. According to the Minister of Manpower these accidents permanently disabled 23 305 black workers and killed another 11 816. This is a very high death and accident rate. If you think about these facts and the people whom you know who have been injured then you do not need much more to be convinced that workers have a direct interest in making sure that the factory is safe.

Unsafe or unhealthy working conditions can affect many workers in a factory. It is unlikely that these workers could get conditions changed if they go about trying to do this as individuals. Health and safety problems are therefore something that must be attacked by your organisation in the factory — your union. Changing and improving conditions of work is an important part of the union's role.

Why do accidents and unhealthy conditions occur in the factories?

Workers have an interest in safety at work because it is their lives that are at stake. Management also has an interest in safety but for different reasons. Management is more concerned about production and profits. The union is more concerned about people.

Crudely put, the view of many managers is: 'It is my factory, they are my profits, these are my machines — and be careful not to damage them — but it is your fault if you have an accident.'

It is often the worker who takes the blame, the pain and the cost of an accident. Workers are lazy, they are stupid. They do not care about themselves or the machines. Workers come to work drunk. They do not wear safety equipment. These are the kind of reasons that managers use to explain away high accident rates.

Some bosses do not even bother to explain. They have found that if an unskilled worker is injured it is cheaper to just pay him Workmen's Compensation and then get a new worker.

But if a semi-skilled or skilled worker is injured then management finds out that this costs them more. This is where management finds its interest in health and safety. Accidents mean lost time and lost time means loss of production. Because of this certain managements are keen to improve safety.

A careful look at why accidents happen shows that most of them are not caused by workers. Poor and inconsiderate management is more usually the cause. What are these causes? There are five important ones:

- * **The design of the machinery:** If management buys and installs machines which do not have safety designed into them then there will be accidents to the workers.
- * **Unsafe layout of the work-**



11 000 WORKERS DIE EVERY YEAR IN FACTORY ACCIDENTS, HERE WE LOOK AT SOME OF CAUSES OF THESE ACCIDENTS AND AT THE NEW SAFETY LEGISLATION.



place: Management are most encouraged by increased production. Management might want to increase production and cut costs by putting many machines in a room that is too small. This can be the cause of accidents.

* **Inadequate training:** How many workers are trained when they start a new job? Has anyone ever told you about the hazards of your job? If you are not

told about these things then it is predictable that someone is going to suffer for it. That somebody will be a worker, not the management who do not train workers to avoid hazards.

* **Inadequate supervision:** Supervisors are in the workplace to encourage production and to get you to work faster. Could this be the cause of accidents?

This duty can certainly make the supervisor blind — blind to the danger of what the workers are being made to do.

* **The work environment, stress and working conditions:** The work environment can be dangerous to the health and safety of the workers. The chemicals, dusts or fumes can cause illnesses. The noise can make you deaf. Can the worker be blamed if there is an accident after he or she has worked 11 hours in a place that is hot, noisy and dusty? No-one can be fully alert under these conditions.

In 1983 the government passed a law called the Machinery and Occupational Safety Act. This law came into operation in October this year. Before this law was passed the safety of workers in factories was covered by the Factories Act. Even with the old law there were still many

accidents so we cannot expect that the workers are going to be safe just because there is a new law.

The new Safety Act is very similar to the old Factories Act. However there are two important changes which affect workers directly. The first of these is that safety committees and safety representatives must be established in every factory. The second is that the Act has some strict disciplinary measures in it for workers.

Safety Committees and Safety Representatives.

The new Safety Act says that all employers must designate one safety representative for every fifty workers. The word designate is important because it can mean that management alone chooses the safety representative. If management alone chooses the safety representative then clearly this committee is no different from a liaison committee. Union members know that a liaison committee is as useful as a boot without laces.

The safety committee will have both management and workers on it. Management can also choose to have other experts on the committee — such as the safety officer or the factory doctor or nurse. The business of the committee will be to make reports and recommendations to management.

Strict Disciplinary Measures.

As we have already said it is a common belief among managers that workers are to blame for most accidents. The government seems to share this view. The new Safety Act makes it a crime if you do not obey regulations — for example if you do not wear the protective clothing that management gives you (such as gloves, masks or ear muffs). The punishment for this crime is a possible fine of R2 000 or 12 months imprisonment or both.

Problems with the New Safety Act

If we look carefully at the Act we can see that it makes no mention of unions. It seems that the government and the employers want to keep unions right out of this important area that affects workers directly.

The new Act favours employers by allowing them to designate the safety representatives and by giving them the power to set up a liaison committee for safety. We know that liaison committees are just places for talking and that management uses such committees to pass down orders to the workers. If the union shop stewards became involved as safety representatives it is possible that they too would have to pass on managements' orders. They will also have to spend their time checking that workers are wearing ear muffs, masks or gloves and that they are doing the job safely. If workers do not agree with what they are ordered to do then the shop steward or safety representative will become involved in giving workers warnings and disciplining them. This is exactly what management would like to see safety representatives doing but we can see that this would do nothing about the five main causes of accidents that we listed earlier.

It is also possible that when safety committees have been set up in the factory there will be resistance from management to talk to the unions about health and safety issues.