



TEAMSTERS

Safety & Health FACTS

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HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES- WHY HAVE ONE?

First Defense Against Job Hazards

Every local union should have an effective health and safety committee. Most health and safety committee activities can be started right away and do not require an agreement with management. In addition, every local should try to establish a joint health and safety committee with management.

The following is an overview of some of the responsibilities of the local union health and safety committee.

1. **Listening to the membership.** What complaints do workers have about unsafe conditions? About chemicals, noise, dust, or other health hazards? About illnesses which might be related to the job?

The health and safety committee can't merely wait for workers to bring up complaints. Committee members have to go to the workers, stewards, and local union officials and ask.

2. **Looking at the plant to find hazards.** On a regular basis, the committee should check each part of the plant to find new hazards and make sure old ones have been fixed.

Some committees have the contract right to make walkthrough tours or inspections, either independently or with management. Without that right, committees must piece together the information with the help of stewards and members from each department or work area.

3. **Investigating accidents, near misses and illnesses.** One of the best ways to prevent health and safety hazards is to study the accidents and illnesses that have already happened or nearly happened.
 - ♦ What were the contributing causes - overloading the worker, poor equipment design, lack of maintenance, lack of training?
 - ♦ If some carelessness was involved, how could the job be designed with proper safeguards so a mistake could not become an injury?
4. **Keeping written records.** The committee needs good records in order to prove its case in discussions with management and to back up grievances, bargaining demands, and OSHA complaints.

Records the committee should keep include:

- ♦ Results of plant surveys, including what hazards were found and when they were corrected;
 - ♦ Grievances on health and safety issues, and how they were settled;
 - ♦ Copies of all papers related to OSHA inspections;
 - ♦ Government or union reports or articles on hazards in a particular industry;
 - ♦ Information collected from the company such as names of chemicals; results of tests for noise, chemicals, or dust; and results of medical exams sponsored by the company; and
 - ♦ Local union records about sickness and accident claims, workers' compensation cases, or other information that might tell something about work hazards.
5. **Helping to negotiate safety protections into the contract.** Contract language should spell out the employer's safety responsibilities and the health and safety committee's rights. The contract may also provide some way of settling safety disputes without long delays, since delay in correcting a safety hazard may mean injury or even death.

The health and safety committee can prepare the information negotiators need to argue for contract changes and can help rally membership support.

6. **Filing grievances.** Grievances will be most successful if the contract contains specific safety rights and protections. But even if the contract does not cover a specific hazard, grievances can be filed if the contract has general language saying that the employer recognizes the need to reduce injuries.
7. **Using OSHA rules and rights.** The committee should have copies of federal or state OSHA standards and should keep them up to date.

If necessary, the committee must be prepared to use OSHA rights to ask for an inspection or to be protected from punishment for safety activities.

If an OSHA inspector visits the workplace, a committee member should go with him or her at all times to make sure the inspector takes action on all of the hazards.

8. **Using company safety rules.** The committee may want to insist on being informed ahead of time so it can give its ideas before company safety rules are issued.

Once company rules are established, the committee can make sure the company itself lives up to them. For instance, if the rules say, "Get help when carrying heavy, bulky objects," the committee should make sure supervisors are allowing workers to get that extra help.

If the rules say, "Fork lifts, trucks and other vehicles will be operated at a safe speed at all times," the committee should make sure operators are not given so much work that they cannot get everything done without driving too fast.

Study the company rules to see which ones are not being followed. If a worker is required to violate the rules, file a grievance, arguing that the company is forcing the worker to risk both injury and discipline for not following the rules.

9. **Staying in touch with regional union representatives on safety issues.** The regional representatives may have information or ideas the committee can use. They also should be kept informed of committee activities.

With the help of local union committees, regional representatives can tell workers in one plant about the experiences of committee members in other plants that make the same product or are owned by the same company.

10. **Educating the membership.** Keep everyone in the local informed of the committee's activities. Share the information obtained in training sessions or publications.

Education can be done by:

- ♦ Talking to workers individually at work, on the phone, or wherever they can be found off the job;
- ♦ Having group meetings during breaks on the job;
- ♦ Show a film or have other entertainment or speakers at union meetings or special events; or
- ♦ Passing out and posting leaflets and newsletters.

Joint Committees - For Show or For Real?

An effective joint committee is not a committee set up by management merely to post safety slogans and urge workers to be more careful on the job. In a real joint committee, labor and management meet as equals with the goal of eliminating unsafe conditions.

A joint committee is more likely to be effective if:

- ♦ There are an equal number of union and management members, with a co-chairperson chosen by each side.
- ♦ The union has the right to choose its own committee members.
- ♦ The committee meets at least once a month and whenever either side feels it's necessary.
- ♦ Either side may place health and safety matters on the agenda for committee meetings.
- ♦ Before each meeting, the committee makes inspections to look at new problems and check on progress made since the last meeting.
- ♦ The union has copies of all information related to safety and health that the company has.
- ♦ All proposed changes in the workplace are thoroughly discussed by the committee ahead of time so the committee can make recommendations concerning the possible effect on safety and health.
- ♦ Union members keep their own records of what is said at committee meetings.
- ♦ The union approves the official minutes of meetings.
- ♦ Committee members can make inspections of plants and promptly investigate all accidents and near misses.
- ♦ Committee members receive their normal pay while doing committee business.
- ♦ Committee members have the right to shut down dangerous operations until the hazard can be corrected.