

# FORM A WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

*“During our hotel organizing campaign, we found that a worker health and safety committee can really get something concrete done. On their own initiative, they collected evidence showing how increased workloads were actually making the housekeepers sick. The workers on the committee also played key roles in figuring out what actions to take around this issue during the campaign. Their leadership and voice got stronger through this work. They were very visible when we held informational pickets. They spoke out at community hearings about their working conditions. They all learned a lot about health and safety, and about creative ways to get changes made.”*

*—Hotel Employees/Restaurant Employees (HERE) union organizer*

**T**here are many types of health and safety committees, but there is an advantage in having a worker or union committee that is independent of management. Joint labor-management committees can provide a useful forum to work together with management, but worker committees allow workers to choose their own issues and solutions. They can freely discuss health and safety problems, and act to solve them. Whether the committee is created by an existing union at the workplace or by workers who do not yet have a union, it can be an independent advocate for health and safety rights.

A committee can also help its members develop leadership skills. They learn to work together, speak up, and take action.

## **What Is This Tool?**

Worker health and safety committees identify workplace hazards and develop strategies to tackle them. They use a variety of means to bring pressure on the employer to correct unsafe conditions. Their tactics can include all the various “tools” described in later sections of this book. As explained in Chapter 1, the book is specifically intended to be a resource for worker committees and similar groups.

Depending on the situation, worker committees may take various forms. They may be informal groups of volunteers who get together spontaneously at a non-union workplace. Or they may be very structured groups, with elected or appointed members and well-defined responsibilities within a union. Most committees fall somewhere in between.

What does a typical committee do? In both union and non-union settings, many worker health and safety committees:

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings.
- Arrange training for committee members.
- Identify hazards in the workplace through worker surveys and inspections.
- Investigate reports of accidents, injuries, and illnesses.
- Evaluate and monitor the employer’s safety plan and performance.
- Request and analyze health and safety information which the employer must provide by law.

- Locate other sources of health and safety information outside the workplace, and seek help from resources such as universities, occupational health clinics, industrial hygiene professionals, and local Committees for Occupational Safety and Health (“COSH” groups, see Appendix 2).
- Educate co-workers and listen to their viewpoints and concerns.
- Recommend ways to correct unsafe conditions and develop strategies to get the employer to implement those recommendations.
- Meet with the employer about health and safety issues.
- Build alliances with sympathetic community groups and public officials to help bring pressure on the employer.
- Seek public support for health and safety issues through rallies, special events, media coverage, and other means.
- Make complaints to OSHA and other regulatory agencies, and follow up throughout the complaint process.
- Recruit new committee members on an ongoing basis.
- Celebrate “wins” and build on success.

In organized workplaces, union health and safety committees may have additional functions. They may negotiate directly with the employer about specific hazardous situations, or propose health and safety contract language for the union’s bargaining team. Sometimes members of a union committee also participate as a group on a joint labor-management committee. Union committees may have a recognized status under the contract, sometimes allowing such advantages as the right to enter and inspect the workplace, the right to obtain employer records not otherwise available by law, or the right of committee members to get paid release time for their activities.

In non-union workplaces, worker health and safety committees have fewer rights than union committees but can still accomplish a great deal. Initially, such committees may hold their meetings and conduct most of their activities outside the workplace. A committee may receive encouragement and support from a community-based workers’ center, a community organization, an international union organizing campaign, or a local “COSH” group. Members of a committee that is not yet part of a recognized union have less legal protection from employer retaliation, so outreach to build community support and legitimacy can be especially important.

Whether your workplace is union or non-union, consider a worker health and safety committee. However, if there is already a strong worker-oriented group (an organizing committee, shop stewards, etc.), decide if it makes sense to form a separate health and safety committee or to integrate health and safety into existing work.

STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

**Nuclear Plant Committee Gets Company’s Attention**



The International Union of Electrical Workers/ Communications Workers of America (IUE) has helped to set up local worker committees at several non-union workplaces. These committees harness the experience, skills, and commitment of workers. Committees plan and carry out campaigns around health and safety as well as other issues. The goal is to get things moving and see if workers acting together can win concrete gains even before there is an official representation election.

The committees are self-directed, although the international union helps facilitate activities and provides training and resources. As one IUE organizer explains, “The committee is a hybrid between an organizing committee and a union local. It tries to build union support by showing it is possible to improve working conditions through collective action.”

At a nuclear fuel facility in Wilmington, North Carolina, the IUE’s committee called workers to a meeting to discuss the company’s punitive approach to health and safety. Workers said that when they reported an accident or injury, the company investigated and invariably found the worker to be at fault. The worker would then receive a “coaching session” on how to modify behavior and work more safely. A record of the session was put in the worker’s file. Workers also complained that they had difficulty obtaining copies of Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) as required by law. And they had problems with the company’s procedures for handling hazardous materials.

The committee timed their meeting to occur just before a scheduled OSHA inspection of the company. One worker said, “That meant the company was under pressure. Management became aware of what had been said at our meeting and ‘heard’ our concerns. Shortly afterward the company started making MSDS information easily available in the workplace. Supervisors were also telling us that we should report all accidents and could do so without fear of retribution. Despite the fact that we do not have a formal union, when we acted like one, we got results.”

## **Why Use This Tool?**

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### **Advantages**

- A worker committee can accomplish real change in the workplace. Committees can help save people's health and even their lives.
- A committee provides a host of opportunities to make workers strong. Workers learn problem-solving skills, and can develop into leaders. When there are successes, they help all workers, not just committee members, better understand the value of collective action.
- A committee can be a bridge across different work areas, job classifications, and even different unions. People throughout a worksite often share similar health and safety problems, and may not even realize it. Janitors clean the same buildings that clericals and lab technicians work in all day. A committee that includes members from different work areas and jobs provides an opportunity to compare experiences and work together. If there are several unions at the worksite, a multi-union health and safety committee can be an effective way to build a cooperative relationship. It can serve as a springboard for working together on other issues.

### **Challenges**

- Whether in a union or non-union setting, most committees are made up of volunteers. Members are not paid and often meet "after hours" at a location away from the worksite. These factors can limit participation because they are a hardship on people who already work a full day and may have family responsibilities. Some workers feel that the committee simply takes too much time. Possible solutions include holding short meetings, not too often, and giving members committee assignments they can complete on their own whenever they have free time.
- Workers may feel they do not have the necessary technical knowledge to become involved with the committee. But committee work and training sessions can help reassure them that it's not necessary to be an expert. Many committees learn as they go along.
- Some workers may hesitate to join the committee because they fear "sticking their necks out" and being seen as activists. They may not be ready for potential confrontation until they see that the benefits outweigh the risk. A few successes may convince them to get involved. People also need to understand that they have legal protection against employer retaliation.
- It can be difficult for a committee to afford training, a resource library, meeting space, printing of flyers, equipment, and other essentials unless a union or community organization provides them with funds or they have some other means of fundraising.

## STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

**Laundry Workers' Committee Responds to Boiler Explosion**

UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) found that health and safety can be a powerful way to activate and energize union members. The union's worker committees have been successfully taking on OSHA issues at a chain of industrial laundries serving hospitals and other health care institutions.

There had just been a major boiler explosion at one of the shops. No one was hurt, but the explosion blew out the windows in a number of cars in the parking lot. Cal/OSHA had been called after the explosion, but inspectors had not contacted the union steward to accompany them. The union asked Cal/OSHA to include them in every aspect of the investigation from that point on. The union also filed a formal Cal/OSHA complaint about some aspects of the explosion and the cleanup that followed. For example, the company had not checked for the presence of asbestos before they began the cleanup.

In this shop, there were not enough activists to form a separate health and safety committee, so union staff worked with shop leaders on what was called a Justice Committee. The Justice Committee became involved in the Cal/OSHA complaint. Most conversations with Cal/OSHA were held on a speakerphone so everyone could hear. The Justice Committee also sent the Plant Manager a letter about their desire to designate representatives for any future Cal/OSHA inspections, and the lack of an effective alarm system in the plant. Justice Committee members were also concerned that the company would find ways to harass or fire them for breaking unwritten and unknown work rules. They decided to make a request that management issue written work rules. They saw this as a way to protect themselves from reprisals.

Later, the union asked Cal/OSHA to hold the closing conference on its investigation in a park across from the laundry, during the shift change. The Justice Committee set up folding chairs in the park, made sodas available, and leafleted the plant to invite workers to come. Union staff and the committee also prepared some key questions that they believed would open Cal/OSHA's eyes to other problems at the plant. About 70 workers showed up at the meeting. A Cal/OSHA industrial hygienist and a Cal/OSHA staff person who speaks Spanish spent over four hours answering workers' questions and interviewing them about plant conditions.

"The important outcome was the sense of empowerment the workers in that shop now feel," said a UNITE staff member. "Recently, when there was a problem with a natural gas smell in the shop, one of the Justice Committee members called Cal/OSHA directly for advice on how to proceed."

UNITE is now encouraging Safety Committees and Justice Committees in all their laundries to ask management for copies of boiler permits.

## **Step by Step**

### **1. Recruit workers to serve on the committee.**

Committees typically attract workers who have some interest in and concern about health and safety. Some may have been personally impacted by unsafe conditions and developed a commitment to health and safety due to this experience.

Committees in a unionized setting may also include union leadership, stewards, and staff. If these people are not able to serve on the committee directly, it is important for the committee to work closely with them to coordinate the health and safety work with overall union goals, policies, and campaigns.

Membership of a committee should reflect the diversity of the workforce. As much as possible, the committee should include workers with different backgrounds and languages, and from different jobs, shifts, and locations within the workplace. This allows the committee to see what problems people have in common, address a wider range of hazards, and develop relationships with a broader group of workers.

If your committee is to be made up of volunteers, identify workers who are interested and ask them to join. One-to-one personal contact works best. Pay particular attention to recruiting workers who have had direct experience with dangerous conditions. These may be people who have been injured, who have gone to their supervisors to complain about hazards, or who have signed petitions.

Issue flyers and hold open meetings to let everyone know a committee is being formed. You may want to draw attention to your committee by sponsoring a short educational workshop on a health and safety topic of special concern in your workplace. Publicize the workshop and invite everyone who is interested.

In a more formal unionized setting, committee members may be elected by the membership or appointed by the union leadership. It can still be difficult to find people willing to serve, so you'll probably need to do some recruiting.

If there are several unions at the worksite representing different categories of workers, consider forming a multi-union health and safety committee. Try to get "buy in" from the leadership of each union, and ask them to help by encouraging their members to get involved.

### **2. Agree on the purpose and structure of the committee.**

As a group, map out the committee's purpose and how it will operate. If you prefer not to have formal by-laws, it's still useful to draft a short document that answers some basic questions: Why does the committee exist? Who will be on

it? Will different members have different roles and responsibilities? Who will do what? How will committee leadership be chosen? How often will the committee meet? How will necessary funds and other resources be obtained? How will the committee involve the rest of the workforce in its activities? If your workplace is unionized, how will the committee relate to the union's existing structure? If your workplace is not unionized, is the committee affiliated with a community organization or other group, and what will the relationship be?

In this statement of purpose, include language that the committee (whether union or non-union) is not responsible for health and safety conditions in the workplace. A statement like this can be important so it is clear (and in writing) that the committee is not accepting any legal liability for workplace hazards. By law, the employer is always responsible for maintaining a safe and healthy workplace.

### **3. Identify committee training needs.**

Consider setting up an ongoing training program for committee members. This will build the committee's capacity to do its work and help develop leadership. The more people you have who are knowledgeable about health and safety, the more effective the committee can be. People who join the committee will probably have a range of experience and knowledge, from beginners to experts. Discuss possible training with everyone at a committee meeting and find out what people need.

You may be able to arrange training for the committee through a "COSHH" group, a university health and safety program, an international union health and safety department, local professionals, or a workers' center. Committee members can also train each other, especially if your committee includes people with expertise in certain areas.

The training doesn't always have to be limited to "traditional" hazards, such as toxic chemicals and unsafe equipment. It may also cover hazards related to how work is organized (hours of work, pace of work, workload, and staffing levels) as well as ways to control these hazards. These are all legitimate health and safety issues that committee members may want to learn more about.

In addition to health and safety topics, committee members may want training in "people skills" such as how to involve and mobilize other workers, how to conduct their own training programs, how to run effective meetings, how to communicate effectively with management, and how to develop relationships with the community and the media. Today, many committees may also want training in how to use computers in their work and how to set up a website.

For more on training, see Chapter 3.



#### 4. Develop an action plan with a timeline.

The committee should think systematically about what you plan to do. A written action plan is an excellent idea. The action plan should spell out your *priorities*, your *goals*, your *methods* for achieving change, and a proposed *timeline*. (See the **Action Plan Worksheet** at the end of this chapter.)

**Priorities.** You may discover there are numerous health and safety problems that people are concerned about. The committee can't tackle everything at once. In your action plan, set some priorities based on which hazards are most serious, affect the most people, or are most likely to be won quickly.

**Goals.** Decide what problems you want fixed, and what you want the employer to do about them. Be as specific about the solutions as you can, but also be open to new ideas that may come up later. Distinguish between **short-term** and **long-term** goals. For example, if noisy machinery is a problem, your **long-term** goal might be to convince the employer to buy new, quieter equipment. But if this isn't feasible right away, a **short-term** goal might be to soundproof the existing machinery, have it moved further away from workers, or give workers effective hearing protection devices.

**Methods.** You may want to base these on the "tools" described in this book. The book describes a variety of ways to address health and safety, but you may not use every tool. A given tool may or may not work well in your situation. For example, in some cases you may want to begin by gathering data about hazards in the workplace. But in other cases this particular step may not be necessary because it is already clear to everyone what the big problem is. To decide on your tools, you can use the worksheet at the end of Chapter 1.

**Timeline.** A timeline is valuable so you'll have some idea of what step to take when, and set deadlines for specific actions. But your timeline will always be approximate. You can't predict how long it will take to win.

#### 5. Involve the workforce.

The committee should maintain strong ties to co-workers. Keep the workforce informed of what you're doing, and ask workers for their ideas and opinions. Some committees hold open forums or publish newsletters for co-workers. Try to involve interested people in committee projects. If you get results, publicize it in the workplace and invite everyone to the celebration!

#### 6. Organize community support.

Some committees develop outreach plans to guide them in approaching the local community for support. Decide which community organizations, churches, or political leaders might become allies, and how you will contact them. Also decide how you can encourage local media to cover what you're doing.

## 7. Evaluate the committee's work.

As the committee's work moves along, take time periodically to check up on how you're doing. Are you making progress toward achieving your goals? Are you meeting your timelines? Also evaluate your strategies—what worked and what didn't? Finally, decide how the committee itself is doing. Are people working together well? Are the decision-making process and individual assignments clear? Do any committee procedures need to be changed?

### STORIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

#### Airport Workers Organize for Safety



Recently the International Brotherhood of Teamsters made health and safety a key part of an organizing drive at a cargo facility near San Francisco International Airport. Air cargo handlers at the non-union company came to the Teamsters with concerns about unsafe equipment, workload, lack of safety training, and the company's history of accidents.

The Teamsters conducted a nine-month campaign, part of a larger effort by a coalition of unions that sought to build membership and activism at the airport. With the help of the coalition, the Teamsters organizing committee began to function like a health and safety committee because these issues were so important to the workers. The committee held several rallies to call public attention to the company's safety issues and its refusal to correct these problems.

Workers participated in devising many creative strategies. They helped draft a sheet of health and safety chants, including "Overload is a real mistake – Our health and safety is at stake" and "Health and safety is a must – Without the union who can you trust?" Workers helped design leaflets targeted at the company's clients, showing that safety hazards also put customers at risk. A local newspaper ran an investigative article, covering the company's history of safety violations.

A downturn in the airline industry following the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center led to significant layoffs. Together with other factors, this presented obstacles that the campaign could not overcome.

Would the Teamsters incorporate health and safety into future campaigns? A member of the national organizing staff responds, "Absolutely. This confirmed that safe working conditions really matter to workers. The most effective part of the campaign was getting workers to come to us with their safety and health issues and then getting media attention about their concerns. It validated the health and safety issues that workers had been raising for months. We will deal with these issues in our future strategic organizing efforts around the country!"

## **Tips for Success**

### **Take the committee seriously.**

Run your committee in an organized way. Have regular meeting times, agendas, and minutes of your meetings. Track your past decisions, and follow up on your commitments. Have committee members report regularly on their projects.

### **Coordinate health and safety committee work with other activities.**

If you are at a union workplace, maximize your committee's effectiveness by working closely with union leaders, stewards, and other union committees. Consider joint campaigns that combine health and safety with other issues.

### **Set realistic goals.**

Workers can become frustrated and demoralized if the committee tries to take on too much or if winning a health and safety issue takes a long time. Be realistic in your expectations of how much you can accomplish, and how soon.

### **Be democratic.**

Avoid methods of leadership that dictate what people should do. Structure your meetings and other events so participants feel free to voice opinions.

### **Be visible.**

Make the committee's existence known to co-workers, the employer, and the community. On an ongoing basis, keep everyone up to date on your activities. Establish a reputation as an intelligent, well-organized, assertive group that knows what it's talking about and often succeeds.

### **Stay independent.**

If members of a union health and safety committee also serve on a joint labor-management committee, they should remember that they represent workers' interests. It is crucial that the union members on the joint committee meet independently to prepare for joint committee meetings. This is an opportunity to set goals and tactics, and decide how to approach joint meetings.

### **Find and use available resources.**

International unions, "COSH" groups, universities, occupational health clinics, and industrial hygiene professionals can be good sources of health and safety information, training, and help. Seek them out and see what they can offer.