

GUEST COMMENTARY: Fight For Workplace Safety Must Continue

By Joe Gutierrez | Posted: Tuesday, April 27, 2010 12:00 am

Attached to a wall in the USWA Local 1010 Memorial Union Hall in East Chicago is a plaque of granite engraved with the names of 331 workers killed on the job while working for Inland Steel Co.-Ispat-Inland with a promise to uphold its goal to never have another name added to that list.

Decades of struggle by workers and their unions have resulted in significant improvements in working conditions, but the toll of workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths remains enormous. Each year, thousands of workers are killed, and millions more are injured or diseased because of their jobs.

We remember these workers on April 28, Workers Memorial Day, first observed in 1989. April 28 was chosen because it is the anniversary of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the day of a similar remembrance in Canada. Trade unionists around the world now mark April 28 as an International Day of Mourning.

OSHA records indicate that workers in basic steel facilities are at greater risk for nonfatal injuries and illnesses than workers in other general industry jobs. Workers live with the very real threat of being killed or seriously hurt on the job, and this cloud hangs over every worker and workplace not only in our country, but also around the world.

On an average day, 15 workers die from workplace injuries and disease; another 11,000 are injured.

For eight years, the Bush administration failed to take action by making appointments to key positions with unqualified people who focused on their own interests. They withdrew or blocked safety rules; they favored voluntary efforts over strong enforcement. They closed their eyes to the plight of worker safety.

But today is different. The Obama administration holds promise for new and stronger workplace safety standards. Now the U.S. Department of Labor fights for working people, but that fight has only begun.

Those inept appointments made by the Bush administration in areas that affect the safety and health of all American workers and their families came home to roost a mile and a half below ground in a West Virginia coal mine where 29 miners died.

Safety is more than a word. One person hurt on the job, wherever it occurs, is an affront to the moral requisite of a society that calls itself caring and compassionate. One person killed on the job wounds the very soul of all workers worldwide.

Accidents do not discriminate. An explosion will maim or kill anyone, company or union.

Local 1010 under the direction of President Hargrove and his safety committee in conjunction with his company counterparts have taken the lead in working to eliminate unsafe conditions in the workplace. Unfortunately, Massey Coal mine and similar others are not unionized and unionization is one of the most effective vehicles empowering workers to monitor employers' compliance with labor laws and job safety. But once the parties have agreed on rules and regulations and those mechanisms have been set in place, workplace safety cries out not only for compliance but diligence in implementation from all parties.

The union's mantra is, "If it's unsafe, we don't do it!" But too often, rhetoric replaces action. Safety requires more than lip service. Too often, near misses are considered irrelevant as long as an accident did not occur. A near miss should be considered a wake-up call, a warning. The awful disaster at Massey Coal mine that killed 29 miners is an example of warnings and near misses disregarded because nothing happened that time.

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The burden of safety is a moral one that must be treated with the ultimate respect. Both management and union have a duty to insure that workers return home to their families safely and in good health. One very important factor contributing to a safer work site in unionized settings is the use of a safety plan fitted for every project as implemented at Arcelor/Mittal, and of in-house safety officers whose responsibility is to ensure the immediate accessibility of safety equipment and the use thereof. This is an essential duty that must be treated as such.

Safety is more than a word, and certainly "safety officer" is more than a title. A rule is not a rule if it is not enforced. Regulations and rhetoric mean nothing if not followed by action. The work for improved safety on the job is not finished. And the fight goes on.

Joe Gutierrez is a retired USWA Local 1010 official. The opinion expressed in this column is the writer's and not necessarily that of The Times.

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