

Resolution 13

SAFE JOBS—EVERY WORKER’S RIGHT

THE RIGHT TO A SAFE JOB is a fundamental worker right. All workers—coal miners, construction workers, health care workers and garment workers, whether they live in the United States, Bangladesh or China—should be able to go to work and return home safely at the end of the day. But in too many workplaces around the world, employers’ push for production and profits and disregard for workers’ safety puts workers’ lives in danger.

This past April, we witnessed the worst garment factory disaster in history—the horrifying collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, which housed five factories making garments for U.S. and European retailers. Cracks in the building had been discovered, due to illegal and shoddy construction, making it unsafe. But workers were told to return to work or lose their month’s pay. Soon after, the building collapsed, killing 1,129 workers, mostly women, and injuring hundreds more. Just months earlier, 112 Bangladeshi workers were killed in a fire trapped behind locked doors at the Tazreen garment factory, another producer for global retail chains.

And here in the United States, the same kind of push for production and lack of safety protections costs workers’ lives. In 2010, 29 coal miners died in an explosion at the Massey Energy’s Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, a company with a history of serious mine violations and deaths. A few weeks later, an explosion at the BP Gulf Coast oil well killed 12 workers and caused one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history. This past April, 15 people died in an explosion at a West, Texas, fertilizer plant that processed and stored highly dangerous chemicals. The plant was small and not covered by many chemical safety regulations and had never been inspected by OSHA. And in June, 19 firefighters

died in a massive wildfire in Arizona when they were trapped behind the fire line when the wind shifted; with no way to escape. This was the worst firefighter tragedy since the collapse of the World Trade Center in the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Those are the stories that made the news, but every day, workers in the United States and around the world are injured, killed, maimed or sickened while simply trying to earn a living. Most workplace deaths and injuries are not the result of catastrophes; they occur one by one. These deaths are just as much of a tragedy to these workers and their families. The overall toll of these workplace deaths, injuries and diseases is enormous. Globally, according to the ILO, each year, 2.0 million workers die from injuries and 321,000 workers die from occupational diseases. In the United States, in 2011, 4,693 workers died from workplace injuries and more than 3.8 million workers were injured. Another 50,000 U.S. workers are estimated to die annually from occupational diseases.

In this country, the union movement’s decades-long efforts have improved working conditions and made jobs safer and healthier and strengthened workers’ rights. We’ve won safety laws and safeguards that have reduced exposures to workplace hazards like asbestos, lead and benzene and saved workers’ lives. Since the passage of the landmark Occupational Safety and Health Act and Mine Safety and Act, the job fatality rate has been cut by more than 80%.

Eight years of neglect and hostility under the Bush administration brought progress in protecting workers to a halt, but under the Obama administration we have once again moved forward. Strong, committed advocates have been appointed to lead the job safety agencies. Both OSHA and MSHA have stepped up

enforcement, particularly for employers who have a history of serious and repeated violations. The agencies have increased focus on protecting workers' rights with enhanced whistleblower protection programs and policies to protect workers who report job hazards or job injuries from retaliation. And education and outreach, particularly for vulnerable workers, has been expanded to help workers exercise their legal rights.

But progress on needed new protections has been dismal. The 2010 election of a Republican majority in the House of Representatives brought a renewed anti-regulatory fervor, with business groups and Republicans launching a major assault on regulations and the regulatory system. In the face of this attack, the development of many important safety and health rules stalled, with the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which is responsible for reviewing draft rules, blocking needed protections. The most egregious case has been the delay in OSHA's silica rule, which has been held by OMB for 2½ years. Shamefully, at the end of its first term, the Obama administration record on issuing major final OSHA rules was even worse than the miserable record of the Bush administration.

The same anti-regulatory push has been seen globally, with employers and some governments seeking to roll back and block protections and to reduce oversight, claiming that safety and health regulations are excessive, unnecessary and costing jobs. They are also attempting to use international trade agreements as a means to challenge and undermine proposed and existing safeguards in individual countries.

Workers need more safety and health protection, not less.

In too many countries, safety and health laws are nonexistent, weak or ignored. There is no meaningful government oversight and enforcement and workers have no right to organize and bargain collectively.

Here in the United States, the OSH Act and workplace standards, particularly those for toxic chemicals, are out of date. Millions of workers, including many

state and local public employees, have no OSHA coverage, major hazards remain unregulated and unacknowledged and enforcement tools are too weak. Regulation does not keep pace to effectively respond to imminent and emerging hazards such as pandemic influenza and nanotechnology, the manipulation of particles on an atomic scale, which holds great promise in medical and other applications, but may pose great risks to exposed workers.

More than a decade after OSHA's ergonomics standard was repealed, there has been no progress to protect workers from musculoskeletal disorders, which account for more than one-third of all workplace injuries. On the contrary, the Department of Agriculture has proposed poultry inspection rules that would cut back government poultry inspections and allow line speeds to increase, putting poultry workers at greater risk of injuries and threatening food safety. The AFL-CIO strongly opposes this wrongheaded harmful proposal and has joined with unions, consumer groups and other allies to stop the final adoption of this rule.

Our system of safety and health protections remains fragmented and underfunded. The Obama administration has proposed to cut funding for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the federal job safety research agency, eliminating all funding to train new safety and health professionals. The Chemical Safety Board (CSB), also underfunded, has failed to issue findings on many major chemical disasters and recommendations on how future disasters can be prevented. And the Department of Energy's (DOE) modest efforts at self-regulation and oversight to protect workers at the DOE weapons plants are under attack by contractors and some members in Congress.

Changes in the workforce, work, technology and the economy have brought even greater challenges. Many groups of workers, including immigrant workers, are at much greater risk of injury and death, working in some of the most dangerous jobs and vulnerable because of immigration status and lack of union representation. A growing number of workers in the public and private sector confront the hazards

of working in a deteriorating infrastructure—poorly maintained systems and buildings—that increase their risk of injury.

Workers across all sectors face increased risks due to downsizing, short staffing and increased work demands. Growing violence in society is impacting workers, with workplace violence a major threat for teachers, health care workers, social service workers, prison guards and other security personnel. The growth in contracted and temporary work arrangements has fragmented employment and responsibility, making it more difficult to protect workers and hold employers accountable. Globalization has created additional pressures and greater dangers, with employers looking to cut costs, increase production, reduce wages and benefits and avoid any new requirements.

Addressing these challenges has become much more difficult as employers' ideological opposition to worker rights and government action has intensified and corporate political power has grown.

We must move forward. But we can't win these fights on our own.

The union movement must join with allies—safety and health activists and advocates, family members, worker centers, public interest organizations—to seek stronger safety and health protections and rights for all workers. Together we will:

Strengthen the OSHA and MSHA laws to cover all workers and all work arrangements, toughen enforcement and provide stronger worker rights and anti-retaliation protections, seeking improvements both federally and at the state level.

Continue to push the Obama administration to issue needed rules on silica, coal dust, combustible dust, infectious diseases and other hazards, taking legal action when necessary to protect workers' safety on the job.

Continue to challenge employer policies and practices that discourage or retaliate against workers for reporting injuries or hazards and shift blame and responsibility to workers, and instead push employers to reduce exposures to workplace hazards.

Oppose the industry assault on regulations and corporate legislative efforts to dismantle our system of regulatory safeguards that protect our health, safety and environment and financial security.

Educate workers and union members about job hazards and safety and health rights, and support efforts to organize and take action to improve working conditions.

Fight efforts to use international trade agreements to lower safety and health standards and protections, and instead seek to use these agreements and their enforcement as means to raise standards and improve working conditions for all workers.

And we must and will stop corporations' endless worldwide drive for cheaper production, lower wages and resulting exploitation of workers. With the global trade union movement and our partners, we will seek strong laws that protect workers' safety and health and workers' rights no matter in which country they live or work. We will hold global corporations responsible for their actions and production on their behalf and demand binding enforceable industry agreements that provide workers fair wages, safe working conditions and the right to organize.