America's workplaces--among the deadliest in the industrialized world

Jerry White
13 February 1999

The February 1 tragedy at the Ford Rouge complex in Michigan highlights what is a growing and pervasive problem. On average 17 workers are fatally injured at work every day in the US. Annually more than 6,000 workers are killed and another 50,000 to 60,000 workers die from occupational diseases. In addition, 7 million workers are injured on the job each year.

According to the latest available figures from the National Census of Fatal Occupational injuries, 6,218 workers were killed in 1997, up from 6,112 the year before. The largest portion of deaths (22 percent) involved workers killed in job-related highway crashes, including truck drivers and others who operate motor vehicles. Deaths from on-the-job falls, railway crashes, and being caught in running equipment, such as manufacturing and agricultural machinery, all reached a six-year high in 1997.

The US ranks worst in workplace injuries compared with 15 other industrialized countries. It has the highest occupational injury rate and trails 10 other nations with a fatality rate of 5.9 deaths for every 100,000 workers. Great Britain and the Netherlands reported job death rates of 1.1 for every 100,000 workers.

Norway invests the most money on job safety and health activities--about $11.36 for every citizen. By contrast, the US spends only about $1 per citizen on worker safety programs. Only two countries surveyed spend less. Great Britain reports having more workplace health and safety inspectors than any of the 15 nations studied--one inspector for every 2,354 workers. America was second to last with one inspector for every 54,435 workers.

More than 60 percent--281,000 reported cases--of the reported workplace illnesses in 1997 involved repetitive motion injuries, particularly in the auto manufacturing, meatpacking, apparel and poultry industries. Tens of thousands of workers also became ill from exposure to harmful chemicals.

In 1971 the US government enacted the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Though extremely limited, the law subjected most private employers, for the first time in US history, to safety inspections and penalties for violations. Prior to its enactment there was little to compel employers to even report on job injuries and deaths. According to some estimates over 187,000 lives have been saved and millions of injuries prevented because of these elemental protections.

The current OSHA law still does not cover 8.1 million state and local government employees. Although these public employees encounter the same hazards as private sector workers, in 27 states they are not provided with protection under OSHA.

From the time of enactment, however, these regulations were bitterly opposed by big business. Over the last few years a number of bills have been introduced in Congress to make compliance with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act standards voluntary, limit OSHA standards, and cut funding for safety training by 90 percent.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's current budget is $336.7 million. This is less in real dollar terms than the 1975 budget, although the nation's work force has grown by nearly 50 million.

There are only 2,140 federal and state OSHA inspectors responsible for enforcing the law at more than 7 million workplaces. At its current staffing and inspection levels, it would take federal OSHA 109 years to inspect each workplace under its jurisdiction just once.

In many cases even when OSHA inspections occur they are largely ceremonial. Management is well informed when an inspection is expected, and penalties are nominal. Serious violations, defined as posing a substantial probability of death or serious physical harm to workers, carry an average penalty of only $681. Wyoming has the lowest average penalty for serious violations at $125, while the highest average is Delaware's at $1,332.

Even when large penalties are imposed for blatant violations, OSHA has quietly allowed companies to negotiate settlements of considerably lesser amounts. During the late 1980s, in 24 examples of OSHA "megafines" totaling $29.3 million, the agency accepted settlements of $9.5 million, representing an average reduction of 67.5 percent.

After six years of legal challenges, Ford Motor Co. agreed to pay a $750,000 fine to the federal government in August 1993 and to correct its record keeping on shop floor injuries and illnesses. The dispute dated back to 1987, when the OSHA cited several companies, including Ford, Chrysler, General Motors and Caterpillar, for deliberately concealing eye injuries, back strains and chemical exposures at its plants.

Michigan, where the Ford Rouge complex is located, is one of 23 states that carries out its own inspections, rather than using federal inspectors. Between 1980 and 1998 the number of safety inspections carried out by the Michigan Occupational and Safety Administration fell by 73 percent, from 21,046 to 5,778. MIOSHA has only 42 inspectors to cover 216,000 workplaces in the state. Last year 1,273 industrial locations out of 16,800 were inspected.

In addition to the erosion of health and safety protections, over the last decade there have been widespread changes in state workers' compensation programs. These measures, pushed by the employers and the insurance companies, have reduced companies' payments and medical coverage to injured workers, restricted a victim's right to recover damages from negligent employers, and allowed employers to force injured workers back to the job as soon as possible.

By 1990 state legislators in Michigan boasted that they had cut the average firm's workers' compensation costs by 26 percent from a decade earlier. Among the changes they instituted was a return-to-work provision requiring workers to accept any offer of "reasonable employment" and a stronger "exclusive remedy provision" that limits an injured worker to recover workers' compensation benefits alone for work-related injuries or illness. Other damage claims, including pain and suffering, could only be allowed if a worker could prove in court that an employer "specifically intended an injury.'"

Michigan's changes also included a system allowing employers to "shop around" for the least expensive insurance carrier. By 1994 the state had fully privatized its workers' compensation system by selling it to private insurers such as Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Michigan.

Nationally, according to the AFL-CIO, employer premium costs fell by at least $1 billion between 1996 and 1997, while workers' compensation has become the most profitable line of insurance in the property/casualty field. At the same time disability payments for injured workers have declined in most states and lag far behind pre-injury wages. One recent study in California said that Permanent Partial Disability Benefits (PPD), which are supposed to compensate a worker for the economic loss, diminished wage earning capacity, or impairment resulting from a permanent, but not totally disabling condition, are just 40 to 50 percent of pre-injury income.