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Worker Safety under Siege: Labor, Capital, and the Politics of Workplace Safety in a Deregulated World. Edited by Vernon Mogensen. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2006. xxix, 242 pp. ISBN 0-7656-1448-0, $69.95 (cloth); 0-7656-1449-9, $24.95 (paper).

The central claim made by Vernon Mogensen, the editor of *Worker Safety under Siege,* as well as by most of the volume's contributors, is that deregulation is destroying workplace safety and health. Among the forces and conditions abetting this trend are political and corporate opposition to new regulation, poor enforcement of existing laws and regulations, weakened worker participation in health and safety, and aspects of globalization that have impeded uniform regulation of workplace conditions across national borders. The volume makes a strong case for this general argument. Some of the high points, for me, are the authors' discussions of a societal double standard that devalues the importance of workplace death, the almost unassailable strength of corporate power within the current political setting, and the particularly high risks faced by immigrant workers. A recurring positive theme is that workplaces are safer when strong regulations go together with worker participation in an employer's health and safety program, particularly in workplaces with strong and active unions.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed occupational safety and health activism in most advanced capitalist societies. This book's contributors demonstrate that the rights of workers that drew the most attention in those decades—notably, the right to refuse hazardous work, to be informed of workplace hazards, and to participate in joint health and safety committees with management—have since eroded. Most recently, the Bush administration has withdrawn numerous proposed safety standards of both OSHA and MSHA (the Mine Safety and Health Administration), while expanding voluntary employer safety and health programs and establishing partnerships with businesses that exclude workers and their unions.

Throughout the book, society is depicted as seeming to accept a double standard: causing a death through negligence is a felony when it occurs outside the workplace, but a misdemeanor when it occurs on-the-job. Worldwide, legal punishment of employers is rare and typically less severe than legal punishment for violations of environmental or financial rules. The default perception is that workplace deaths and injuries are unexpected and unintentional happenings, or "accidents"—a point of view Jordan Barab roundly rejects, arguing that because workplace hazards are usually identifiable and the harm from them foreseeable, the term "accident" is rarely apt. Rory O'Neill further argues that negligent employers can almost always kill with impunity, even when major workplace disasters arouse public outrage and a demand for laws to end industrial manslaughter. OSHA is criticized for prosecuting fewer than 10% of the employers who, as shown by its own investigations, have knowingly sent workers into dangerous situations. A global campaign by unions in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and other nations demands corporate accountability, including incarceration of offenders, when workplace safety standards are ignored. Two "corporate killing laws" in Canada and Australia as of 2003 represent notable successes in this area.

Society appears to treat the workplace deaths of some employees, such as astronauts, more seriously than those of day laborers or construction workers. Particularly troubling are the deaths of immigrants and the poor, who do some of America's dirtiest and most dangerous work. Laura Rhodes points out that the U.S. economy is increasingly reliant upon foreign-born workers at the expense of their safety and health. Workers who speak little or no English must cope with safety manuals, signs, and instructions they do not understand, leading to increasing rates of fatal injuries among foreign-born workers. This problem is of unknown current magnitude—data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not include illegal or undocumented workers—and its future is blurred by the shifting, turbulent politics of immigration.

Vernon Mogensen observes that although corporations claim safety regulations are too expensive, businesses routinely overestimate compliance costs as a tactic to oppose regulation. Free-market advocates claim that deregulation's benefits will trickle down to workers, yet class stratification and inequality in the United States are growing, producing the worst disparity between rich and poor of any industrial democracy. Outsourcing moves jobs from countries where safety standards and trade unions are well established to other countries where safety and health enforcement and unions are virtually nonexistent and work is often performed by bonded, prison, or child labor.

Can a worker simply leave a job that he or she concludes is too dangerous? An influential viewpoint in American law historically has been that workers in dangerous jobs do not need to be pitied or rescued because they receive money for their assumption of risk. For example, by this reasoning, a worker whose request for a safety guard on a machine is rejected by an employer but who nonetheless continues work on the job is due no special consideration in the event of subsequent injury, since the worker clearly recognized and accepted the risks. One rebuttal to that argument, expressed in this volume by Dorman, is that workers lacking portable skills or higher education, or having

bills to pay, do not always have the option of changing jobs, and thus cannot freely assume risks. Even today, workers who are uninformed by their employers (and by others) of the actual workplace hazards and risks may not be able to make an informed choice.

No matter how sound the science underlying a set of safety and health standards, their implementation can be suppressed or delayed when corporate interests collude with government officials. This is illustrated by efforts to prevent regulation of silica exposure, as described in this book by Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner. Diseased workers are left with no recourse but civil lawsuits, and corporate interests, flying the banner of "tort reform," have tried to eliminate even this civil right.

The shift toward more white-collar jobs has been accompanied by a trend away from hazards typical of industrial workplaces toward the non-industrial issues of indoor air quality and repetitive motion injuries associated with computer work. Because OSHA has no indoor air regulations applicable to such cases (its standards for air contaminants having been derived from industrial settings), activism has focused on improving conditions at individual workplaces, as described by Joan Greenbaum and David Kotelchuck.

Mogensen insightfully recounts how an ergonomics standard crafted by organized labor was brushed aside following a corporate campaign to discredit the underlying science. President Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress, using the Congressional Review Act, thus effected the first-ever repeal of an OSHA standard. The revolving door between the Bush administration and the business community has clearly frustrated efforts to improve workplace safety, leaving workers and the public to bear the social costs of preventable injuries and illnesses.

Examples from Canada, Brazil, Russia, and Hungary are used to illustrate how market reform and neoliberal policies tend to result in under-enforcement of safety laws, underreporting or poor documentation/tracking of injuries and illnesses, the further empowerment of employers, and the weakening of unions. Using the sinking of the P-36 oil drilling platform in Brazil as an example of the neoliberal management approach, Carlos Siqueira and Nadia Haiama-Neurohr demonstrate that, while a cost-cutting, lean style of management may produce short-term profits, the replacement of experienced workers with poorly trained contract workers in this case became a recipe for disaster. Michael Haynes and Rumy Husan observe that job security concerns in Russia accentuate workers' dependence on workplace management. With no idea how their workplaces compare with safer ones, these workers have tended to become resigned to their own conditions—encouraging the pursuit of individual survival strategies rather than the collective strength of trade unions. Deregulation policies have had especially traumatic and poignant effects in the former Soviet bloc, where, following the Soviet Union's collapse, workers hoped for improvements in health and safety conditions at work, not further deterioration.

Robert Storey and Erick Tucker argue for a critical rethinking of strategy among occupational safety and health activists in the labor movement, since employers coerce, intimidate, or fire workers who form unions or complain about safety violations. Despite injunctions against such union-busting tactics by both U.S. law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, employers are rarely punished for using them. An example of U.S. labor coordinating with labor movements in other countries is the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Workplace safety is clearly intertwined with protection of the environment, as illustrated by the Bhopal Disaster: called an "accident" in the media, it was the result of management cutbacks in safety and quality control to maximize profits.

Does globalization make it virtually impossible to assure workers the rights to free association and the safety and health protection that come with more local social and political structures? These essays clearly and logically support Mogensen's contention that neoliberal policies and globalization operate with their own rules. On the one hand, they focus on opening, deregulating, and privatizing, so as to make an economy more competitive and attractive to foreign investment; on the other hand, they dismantle the decades-old, grassroots-built regulatory safety net, taking workplace safety a giant step back to the nineteenth-century legal doctrine whereby the worker, rather than the employer, assumes the risks and costs of injury, illness, and death.

I am sorry to say that my own observations over the past 20 years validate the dark picture of workplace health and safety presented by this book. Yet, there is certainly hope. Just as preventing the recurrence of the workplace health and safety problems plaguing a specific workplace requires asking "Why?" over and over until the root causes are revealed, laying bare the causes, nature, and scope of the worldwide downward spiral in workplace safety and health is a vital step toward reversing it.

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