

Workers are the Solution, Not the Problem

A Trade Union Approach to Workplace Health and Safety

Based on Safety-II Principles

Unite the Union in the UK and the United Steelworkers (USW) Union in North America (under the banner of the global union Workers Uniting) continue to work on a collaborative approach to improve worker health and safety based on Safety-II principles (New View).

Initially this was a response to the problems faced by both unions from the widespread application by employers of various types of “blame the worker”, behavioural safety programmes, and the need to develop alternative approaches to basic “blame the worker” schemes.

In addition, Unite and the USW have developed a union version of a comprehensive health and safety programme. The unions’ programme, called “Looking for Trouble” has been championed by USW and later taken up by Unite.

Working with various people in the US, and based on the work of James Reason, Erik Hollnagel, Sidney Dekker, Todd Conklin, Bob Edwards and others, the unions are seeking to continue to improve upon the trade union approach to health and safety. This approach creates a positive view of health and safety and champions the role of union safety representatives as well as rank and file workers as a vital part of the process in creating healthy and safe workplaces.

For decade’s workers from around the world, their safety representatives and trade unions have experienced differences with their management counterparts in the area of occupational health and safety management. The most prevalent point of conflict is the erroneous presumption that the predominant cause of injuries is the unsafe act of workers. This ill-fated theory stems from the 1930s work of H. W. Heinrich who found that 88 percent of accidents are caused by “unsafe acts of persons”.

Heinrich’s work and subsequent work of Frank Bird resulted in the prevalent use of the safety triangle that provides a mathematical relationship between major injuries, minor injuries, and no injury events. Heinrich hypothesized that by reducing minor events the probability of serious injuries and fatalities would be reduced. The safety triangle has been

further refined by many safety practitioners to display a relationship between small events and serious injuries and in many cases includes unsafe acts of workers.

This body of work has led to safety management principles, policies and procedures that include safety incentive programs (based on low or no injury reporting), post injury drug testing, accident repeater programs, workplace signs touting the number of days without a workplace injury, and of course behavioural observation programs. Many health and safety practitioners in the trade union movement have characterized these programs as “blame the worker” health and safety programmes. Trade union surveys in the past ten years have documented the prevalence of these programs in a significant number of the workplaces in both the North America and the UK. Trade unionists have raised concerns about these programmes for a number of reasons, but the two primary concerns are that they tend to focus all attention on fixing the worker and do not address the causal factors of injuries and that these programs have led to a reduction in the **reporting** rather than **incidence** of injuries, illness, near misses and hazards in the workplace.

While confronted with this “blame the worker” philosophy, workers, their safety representatives, and trade unions have expounded that all workplace illnesses and injuries are a result of exposure to hazards. These hazards are prevalent in the workplace. There are no exceptions. To that end, workers, their safety representatives and trade unions have focused on the identification, evaluation and control of hazards. They have done this with models that promote worker and trade union engagement in occupational health and safety and that emphasize the appropriate use of the generally accepted hierarchy of controls. This is all part of a trade union approach to health and safety.

While it may not be possible to identify and properly control every hazard in each workplace and the complexity of the interface between workers and work as related to intricacy of the changing nature of hazards, the trade union approach has been a successful model to involve Trade Union Representatives and workers to know where the hazards are in their workplace and to encourage management’s control of these hazards. We believe that this is one vital portion of the foundation of effective health and safety management.

As part of the trade union approach to health and safety, workers and trade unions have developed health and safety training programmes, injury investigation programmes and comprehensive health and safety programmes such as the Looking for Trouble programme from Unite the Union and the United Steelworkers. Although well intended

and well formulated, the union health and safety programmes have not always gained broad traction within the workplaces that the unions represent.

Health and safety has been historically defined by safety professionals, workers and management alike by the absence of injuries and illnesses. In this construct, safe workplaces have few injuries and even fewer illnesses on their injury and illness logs. Charts depicting decreasing accident rates are used to demonstrate safety improvement and success. Unfortunately, serious injuries have not been reduced in workplaces to the same extent. These more serious incidents occur infrequently, but they continue to occur.

Trade unionists again raise concerns that the approach of trying to reduce injuries or incidents by fixing the worker is not effective. While overall industrial safety has improved since the 1930s it is clear that the rate of reduction of occupational injuries, fatalities and major accidents has plateaued at an unacceptably high level. It is time to look beyond worker error to improve safety.

Many health and safety practitioners are now beginning to looking beyond injury rates as an indicator of safety success. New approaches to safety (Safety-II, Safety Differently, Human Organizational Performance (HOP) and the New View of Safety) have become more and more prevalent in workplaces. These “New View” approaches, while all unique, generally view safety as the presence of safe systems and controls as opposed to the absence of injury and illness.

Since then the New View of Safety has taken root in some portions of the global occupational health and safety community. Some employers and some industries have taken to the new view more than others. The new view is based on the presence of controls, the ability to recover safely from an incident, and the importance of worker’s as a resource to improve safety, not a problem to be corrected. In these models performance variability is not considered something that needs to be corrected. Workers deviate from work plans and procedures in response to unexpected or unanticipated conditions.

Many from the ranks of the US and UK trade unions have not considered the New View of safety, some are interested in integrating New View concepts into what they do, and some others have had poor experience with the implementation of New View programs. Those that had poor experiences noted that the focus of the New View programs at their workplaces seemed to be solely on fixing the performance of front line workers. In addition, it was concluded that the trade union approach to health and safety does not have one singular meaning to various unions, particularly in North America.

Unite the Union and the USW health and safety representatives contend that many elements of the New View of health safety are extremely compatible with their view of the trade union approach to health and safety. The challenge for USW and Unite is to develop an approach to health and safety that builds on the long standing model of health and safety based on worker involvement, and also builds on the principles of “Looking for Trouble”, while incorporating the key elements of New Safety.

Union health and safety specialists will present information on the progress of this work, the key issues from Safety-II that are important to workers and trade unions and set out the basic principles that are driving this work.

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