

Mishaps in the workplace are no accident

By Dick Meister

IT'S BEEN 20 YEARS SINCE ENACTMENT OF the Occupational Safety and Health Act, yet millions of Americans continue to fall victim to increasing workplace hazards.

Despite the law, the number of Americans killed on the job this year will again reach more than 10,000, as it has every year in recent history. That's an average of at least 30 workers killed every day of every year. And that's only in accidents. Another 100,000 workers die each year from cancer, lung and heart ailments and other diseases resulting from on-the-job exposure to toxic substances.

The number injured on the job exceeds more than 10 million annually. At least 3 million of those workers are seriously hurt—70,000 in ways that disable them permanently. That's a rate of one job injury every six seconds of every working day.

"Deaths, injuries and occupational disease have become a fact of the workplace, the cost of doing business," declared President John Olsen of Connecticut's AFL-CIO. He spoke at memorial services in Bridgeport for 28 workers who were crushed to death in 1987 when a building they were working on collapsed—an accident blamed on design flaws and the absence of legally required safety procedures.

Olsen's comments came during one of



hundreds of "Workers Memorial Day" observances held across the country last year to launch what has become a major AFL-CIO campaign to pressure Congress and President Bush into strengthening and enforcing the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

This year's observances, held April 28, included ceremonies in Pasadena, Texas, where 23 people were killed and 272 injured—many of them severely burned—when a series of explosions rocked a chemical plant last November.

A ceremony in San Francisco honored five workers who died last November when a huge crane toppled from a high-rise building being constructed in the city's financial district. Jack Henning, head of California's AFL-CIO, remarked that "employers are intolerant of safety regulations and codes if these interfere with profits—that's the reality of our economic system."

On Workers Memorial Day in New York, Mayor David Dinkins ordered flags on city buildings flown at half-staff to honor workers killed on the job. During a memorial service near Gramercy Park, Dinkins remembered James Byrnes, a Transit Authority employee who was killed while working on a section of track in Queens last November.

Byrnes' 15 brothers and sisters attended the ceremony. His brother Patrick said James died following an order to work on a section of track that supervisors knew was unsafe. "My brother's death was avoidable," Patrick asserted. "We as his family want to make sure he did not die in vain. We declare war on death in the workplace."

A promise not kept: When Congress passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970, it provided the machinery for creating and enforcing the nation's first comprehensive health and safety standards and regulations. For the first time, Congress placed government's regulatory emphasis on preventing accidents and illnesses, not merely on remedying conditions after workers had been hurt or made ill.

But the law has never come close to realizing its great promise. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA),

done. The AFL-CIO wants the government to require creation of programs at all work sites to train workers in health and safety matters, as is done in Canada and Europe. It wants labor-management committees set up that would oversee safety programs and have authority to investigate accidents and shut down hazardous operations. The AFL-CIO also wants workers to have the absolute right to refuse unusually dangerous work and to complain of unsafe conditions without fear of employer retaliation.

But giving workers a strong voice is just one of many urgent needs. More money is needed to fund safety research programs. And OSHA must establish better accident-reporting procedures so workers can more accurately measure the hazards they face.

There's also a crucial need to increase substantially the fines and other penalties imposed on employers for violating the safety act. Currently, penalties don't even exist for some of the most dangerous practices in many high-risk occupations. The government has been slow to acknowledge the dangers video-display terminals pose to data processors, and OSHA has done little to prevent the repetitive-motion injuries devastating poultry-processing workers and others.

In the health-care industry, workers need much greater protection from infectious diseases, and they and many other workers need relief from chemicals that can cause reproductive damage and other critical health problems. Bill Robertson, secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, notes, for instance, the lack of effective control over "killer chemicals, which enter the workplace at the rate of 1,500 new compounds a year."

Out of the loop: At the moment, protection is nearly non-existent for an increasing number of immigrant workers, who generally know little about the law and dare not complain of unsafe conditions for fear of being fired. In addition, there are 40 million workers who are not even covered by the safety act. Loopholes in the 1970 law exclude state and local government workers in 25 states from protection by federal guidelines. The law also excludes farmworkers, whose occupation is the country's most dangerous—one in which 1,500 workers a year are killed, more than one-fifth of them children.

Although the Bush administration recently agreed to support an AFL-CIO-backed bill that would triple fines for employers violating the safety act, Congress tabled some of the most promising amendments to the act. Killed in committee were bills that would have protected whistleblowers from their employers and strengthened OSHA's hand with the construction industry—which is responsible for more on-the-job fatalities than any other U.S. industry.

"We die one at a time without being noticed," says William Lucy of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, "but we are determined not to be invisible anymore."

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Dick Meister, a San Francisco writer, has covered labor for three decades as a reporter, editor, broadcaster and commentator. He is co-author of *A Long Time Coming: The Struggle to Unionize America's Farm Workers* (Macmillan).

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U.S. plans to destroy Iraq's media links

If the U.S. does launch an attack against Iraq, don't expect to get live CNN reports from Baghdad. A White House staffer privy to war plans recently confided to one foreign journalist that among the first targets of U.S. bombers over Baghdad would be the satellite uplinks, thus diminishing, or at least delaying, the transmission of disturbing pictures of carnage wrought by the bombing and also impeding the Iraqi leadership from making any direct statements to the outside world.

The disclosure suggests a couple of things: one, that detailed "decapitation" plans—of the sort that Air Force Gen. Michael J. Dugan got fired for disclosing—are still being laid; two, that the White House and Pentagon would make every effort, as in Panama, to restrict information and coverage of the large-scale destruction and death that war with Iraq would produce.

In the past few weeks, every pronouncement of President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker had to be set against the backdrop of last Tuesday's mid-term elections. In tune with the requirements of each campaign stop, the president rattled his saber or invoked his hopes for a peaceful settlement.

But now, with the elections over, what are the likely scenarios for resolution of the Gulf crisis? From Saddam Hussein's viewpoint, the situation has shown steady improvement since the days immediately following his August 2 invasion of Kuwait, when it seemed quite possible that the U.S. would launch an immediate attack.

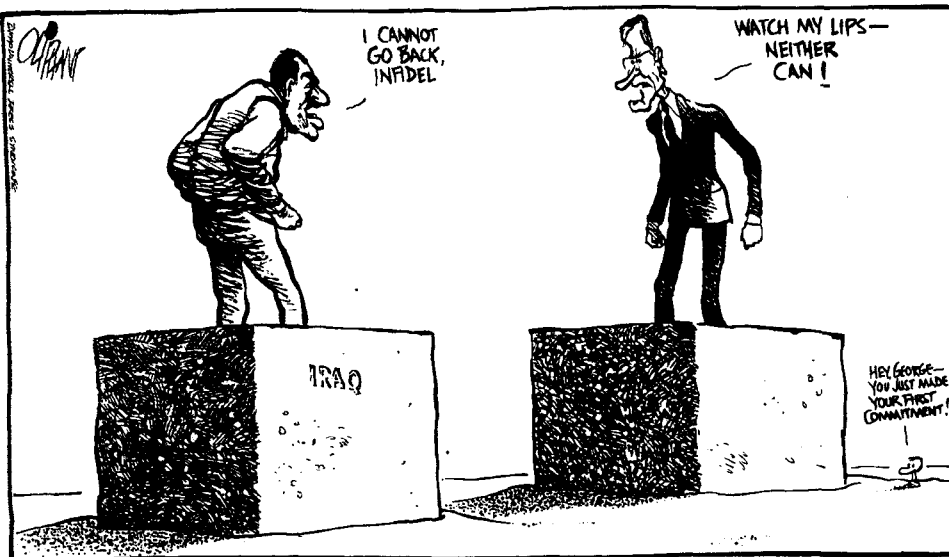
The international unity of policy and purpose is beginning to erode and the seizure of hostages showing useful results, as streams of international figures such as Britain's Edward Heath or Japan's Yasuhiro Nakasone arrive in Baghdad to plead for the release of their nationals. Gorbachov's personal envoy, Yevgeny Primakov, gives mixed signals and Gorbachev himself, in Paris at Mitterand's side, announces that the military option—an attack on Iraq to force it out of Kuwait—is virtually unthinkable. Although a week later Primakov said that Gorbachov had been mistranslated and that force might be ultimately necessary under U.N. auspices, it's clear that the Soviet leader is still strongly in the camp calling for a negotiated settlement.

Recruits to Bush's initial drive for sanctions are beginning to waver, or at least insist at increasing volume that they will be no party to anything beyond the trade embargo imposed by the U.N. Security Council. Only Margaret Thatcher (the UK's economy has been boosted by soaring North Sea oil prices) gives vociferous support to Secretary of State Baker's position that Article 51 of the U.N. Charter (permitting emergency unilateral action to counter invasion prior to collective U.N. decisions) renders it unnecessary for the U.S. to get the go-ahead from the Security Council to launch a military attack.

Under growing internal pressure, Turkey's President Turgut Uzal is emphasizing that his country does not see itself as the launch point for a second front against Iraq from the north. Syria, having taken advantage of the rapprochement with the U.S. to wipe out Gen. Michel Aoun's Christian militia in Lebanon, is now signaling its displeasure at what it sees as destabilizing U.S.

ASHES & DIAMONDS

By Alexander Cockburn



deliveries to Israel of Patriot missiles, adding that Bush's reaction to the massacre of 21 Palestinians near the Dome of the Rock was disgracefully feeble.

A few days later, amid suspicions of a quick dose of Saudi aid to brace Syria's resolve, Syrian Information Minister Mohammed Salman announced that Syria was committed to sending troops to the Gulf and would send further troops. But the hot/cold rhetoric of the Syrian leadership suggests its ambivalent attitude toward the coalition. There are signs that other Arab nations may be inclining toward the same view, despite the initial furious roars from Egypt and Saudi Arabia that Saddam and his entire apparatus had to be extirpated.

Not only would a devastated Iraq leave Israel with enhanced power, it would also leave Iran as a potentially aggressive power threatening from the east, just as it has done for the past 2,500 years. And despite Turkey's recent insistence that trade sanctions (which are costing it dearly) represent the furthest extent of its commitment, Arabs and Egyptians do not need to go back more than 75 years to remember when they were vassals of the Ottoman Empire. Do they really want Turkey seizing Mosul as one of the prizes of the war against Iraq?

So Saddam can view these developments with satisfaction, just as he exulted when the Israeli slaughter in the Old City tested

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the U.S.-Arab coalition at its weakest point and when the third-ranking member of the Saudi royal family said that, in the event of a withdrawal from Kuwait, his "Iraqi brothers" might well expect to get decent access to the Gulf. The Saudi prince, who later made a rather unconvincing retraction, was thus suggesting that Kuwait should prepare itself to give up Bubiyan and Warbah islands, giving Iraq one of its prime objectives in the invasion.

The U.S. government's disquiet is commensurate with Saddam's satisfaction. As everyone predicted at the start, it is hard

to hold together such an inherently unstable coalition for very long. The only thing that can be pointed to with some gratification is that the U.N. sanctions are having an effect. Though Saddam sacked his oil minister for imposing rationing of gasoline and diesel fuel, consumption of these fuels will still have to be curtailed because of the shortage of additives needed to produce them.

One commonly heard estimate is that sanctions will really start paralyzing Iraq's economy no earlier than next February. A report by the Economist Intelligence Unit in London said that despite such hardship "in two crucial aspects—food and fuel—Iraq and [Iraqi-occupied] Kuwait can survive for a number of months, perhaps until the end of March, 1991."

The rational path for the Bush government to pursue is the sustaining of sanc-

tions and, in parallel, exploration of all avenues to a negotiated settlement of the kind hinted at by the Soviets and the French. But, by his own repeated and foolish public assertions that "no compromise" is possible on full Iraqi withdrawal, restoration of the emir, etc., Bush has seriously limited his capacity to maneuver.

Bush also faces renewed assault from the powerful Israel lobby in the U.S., which sees nothing but danger in any negotiated settlement that leaves Saddam in place and his military forces not substantially depleted. The president is also vulnerable to charges from such conservatives as William Buckley that, having committed more than 200,000 men and women to the Gulf, it would be an unacceptable defeat for the U.S. to withdraw them without the overthrow of Saddam.

Against such considerations are increasingly realistic estimates of the appalling cost of any war in lives and money and the regional power balance. There is already a burgeoning peace movement in the United States and certainly no national consensus for war.

So uncompromising maintenance of sanctions, intimations that withdrawal by Iraq would bring satisfaction in terms of Gulf access and the Rumailah oil field and a conference on other territorial issues in the region would ultimately force Saddam's withdrawal, though he would bluff it out to the end. But there's no conclusive evidence from his political biography that the president has the tenacity and flexibility to pursue this course. War, like Roloids, would bring him quick, if temporary, relief, even though the ailing economy would buckle under \$100-a-barrel oil. The task of the peace movement should be to force him to the former option.

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