Workers' Struggles, Past and Present

Green, James

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The organization of industry around profits and industrial efficiency necessitates a constant conflict with workers' health and safety. Industry is dangerous, not because of some series of technological decisions that were made long ago, but because of day-to-day decisions that determine the organization of the labor process. Workers' lives are threatened by a thousand and one small decisions that put industry profits and efficiency above worker health.

As workers become increasingly aware of corporate mismanagement in this area, health and safety is becoming a more and more prominent issue in the American workplace. It has also emerged as a powerful organizing tool. It is an issue on which activists can win concrete victories and, at the same time, raise crucial questions about the human rationality of the capitalist labor process. In this sense, health and safety victories can act as "non-reformist reforms."

This article is based on my experience working in a leather tannery as a safety researcher over a six-month period. I was hired to rewrite safety codes at the plant and to develop a questionnaire that would convince the Occupational Safety and Health Administration that the tannery workers had been trained in safety procedures.
THE TANNERY

The place where I worked (I will just call it the Tannery) is located along a river in a small California town. It is a leather factory, indistinguishable from any other factory to the outside observer except for the strange and sickening smell that permeates the plant and surrounding neighborhood. The smell is a by-product of the series of chemical processes through which cow hides are stripped of their hair and transformed into different grades of leather. These hides are, in turn, cut, polished, and dyed to the specifications set by the shoe factories and craft people who buy leather from the Tannery.

The leather-tanning industry is in the process of concentration and modernization. Many of the smallest tanneries that cannot keep up with the pace of change are being bought up or closed down. Although the Tannery is still under one-person ownership, it is not the same small-craft operation it was in the 1860s. In line with the general trend in the industry, the Tannery has expanded rapidly in the past eight or nine years. It now employs 420 workers, considerably more than the industry average.

Production never stops at the Tannery. Three shifts of workers keep the process moving 24 hours a day. In response to pressures for modernization within the industry, the Tannery management is constantly experimenting with new ways to make a better grade of leather or to process the leather faster and gain on their competitors.

As the tanning industry matures, it moves closer in many ways to the chemical industry and away from the leather-tanning craft it once was. Like the chemical industry, it has become a dangerous place to work. According to a government booklet, its accident and illness rate is “five times higher than the average for all other industries.”

THE MYTH OF THE SAFE WORKPLACE

When I first began working at the Tannery I was struck by how dangerous it looked. The ground was constantly slick and wet with pools of chemical wastes. Warning signs about dangerous chemicals were posted everywhere. Forklifts loaded with hides were going in every direction, and a lot of the machinery looked unbelievably old and in a poor state of repair. I was therefore shocked when the insurance investigator assigned to the Tannery told me it was “an exceptionally clean shop.” John Woods, the plant safety engineer, said, “This tannery has the lowest accident rate of any tannery in the country and most of the accidents that do occur are only minor cuts and back injuries.” Despite their assurances I soon found that their comments did not reflect the objective reality of working in the Tannery.

In 1977 there were 318 accidents in the Tannery according to management’s safety log. Since there are about 420 employees working there at any one time, this means there were approximately three accidents per four
employees working that year. Of these accidents, 114, or about one third of all reported accidents, were serious enough to require a physician’s care and days off from work. These statistics do not include unreported accidents or “near misses.” Nor do they give any indication of the long-range effects of the many dangerous chemicals used at the Tannery that contribute to occupational disease.

The reason such a clear discrepancy exists between the actual working conditions in the Tannery and the way they are reported by some of the principal people involved in safety surveillance is the main topic of the rest of this paper.

THE ACCIDENT

Despite the fact that the accident statistics reported for the Tannery in 1977 are unusually high for any manufacturing establishment, the plant engineer told me that “last year, 1977, was our best year for safety—probably because people were more cautious after the accident.”

“The accident,” as everyone in the Tannery refers to it, shook up everyone involved and affected many more. For many workers it was a turning point in their consciousness about health and safety.

According to a Tannery foreman who was working nearby, it happened this way:

The tannery had just instituted a new procedure. I can’t remember whether the procedure was two or three days old when the accident happened. The new procedure called for a doubling of the sulfahydrate in the hides in the Beamhouse but they weren’t supposed to be treated with acid in chrometan [the next department in the process]. On the first day the employee who was later killed was supervised and didn’t add the acid [the way he did in the normal operation]. On the second or third day of the experiment the employee did not hang the new procedure on his clipboard. Instead he followed the old procedure—adding acid, which created enormous quantities of the poison gas and he was killed. The foreman in chrometan had told the worker the new procedure, so if you’re going to blame anyone you’d have to blame the [dead] employee himself for not following procedures [emphasis added].

A mechanic who was twenty yards away from the accident when it happened gave this description:

It never should have happened! The company didn’t tag the operation as experimental and didn’t post the new recipe. Furthermore, the worker who always adds the chemicals simply threw in the chemicals that were lined up for him to throw in—someone had lined up the chemicals wrong and included acid among the chemicals to be added. The worker who died simply added a chemical that was lined up for him. He died when he opened the trap door on the vat in order to add the next round of chemicals like he was supposed to.
I saw him open the door and saw him instantly collapse face down. Me and a guy I was working with began to run toward him. We smelled the rotten egg smell and recognized it as Hydrogen Sulfide gas. As maintenance men we had gotten a memo that explained the properties of Hydrogen Sulfide gas and sulfahydrate liquid. The memo was only written in five or six copies. Workers who weren’t in maintenance didn’t get it. We ran to the oxygen equipment. Meanwhile two other workers ran to help the guy who fell. One of them was heavy-set and panting hard when he got there—he collapsed instantly. We dragged two men away and gave them mouth-to-mouth but their skin was turning purple and they both had died.

Altogether five people were hospitalized from exposure to hydrogen sulfide fumes; two died and the other three recovered a few days later, apparently with no long-term side effects.

The local newspaper coverage of the accident reported that the Tannery management had given the following statement to the press:

The accident was not an error in formulation. It was the result of a “human being” dumping the wrong material in the huge drum used for removing hair from the hides.

The California Occupational Safety and Health Administration was called in to investigate the accident. It fined the company $915 for not giving the workers information about possible hazards and for not training workers in the use of emergency rescue equipment.

The incident shook up many people around the Tannery. The newspaper reported that some tannery workers were not satisfied with the safety measures at the plant. It quoted one worker who said: “They tell you to add this and to add that—they don’t tell you what can happen or whether it’s dangerous.”

In response to the new uneasiness many workers were beginning to express after the accident, Tannery management acted swiftly. They had a special hydrogen sulfide gas alarm system installed in the chrometan area that would issue a warning siren when dangerous amounts of the gas were present. They also bought a portable gas tester that could check levels of hydrogen sulfide at any specific worksite. This had the effect of making most people at the Tannery believe that management was doing all it could to protect employees from a similar tragedy ever occurring again.

I was extremely surprised, therefore, when I found out (eighteen months after “the accident” occurred) that the hydrogen sulfide warning system in the Tannery had never been calibrated. This meant that the “safety equipment,” which every person working in that area depended on, would go off in the presence of the gas—but no one could say at what level. When the assistant foreman in the area requested that the system be properly calibrated, management refused, claiming the $800 calibration tube required was too expensive. To make matters worse, the portable hydrogen sulfide gas tester, which was the backup protection for the larger system,
proved to be an unreliable and inaccurate piece of equipment. Nothing was done to replace it even after the foreman working in that area issued formal complaints on several occasions.

Tannery management also cut corners with the emergency rescue equipment. One maintenance worker told me that the air supply equipment was so flimsy that the fire department representative who came out to train workers in its use said he “would never use it in a million years.” The maintenance worker who had formerly been in charge of rescue operations in the Tannery told me he no longer had anything to do with the emergency air supply equipment because “I got in a hassle with John [the plant engineer] about not following OSHA regulations on them.” When he had pointed out that there were many areas of the plant where an explosion or fire would prevent people from being able to reach an air pack (as the tanks were called), the company refused to buy any more equipment because the tanks cost a couple of hundred dollars apiece.

The “accident,” and management’s response to it represent three characteristic patterns in the way Tannery management routinely deals with health and safety issues. The patterns are (1) blaming the victim for accidents, (2) cutting costs, often ruthlessly, in the installation and use of safety equipment, and (3) trying to make the workplace appear safe, without necessarily being safe. In this way, management’s response to health and safety can be interpreted as a conscious manipulation of the workforce and as a mechanism of social control meant to insure that workers continue to produce even under the most dangerous conditions.

These responses on the part of Tannery management are not unique. In fact, they are totally consistent with the industrial vision of safety that began to develop at the turn of the century and which continues to guide industrial safety practices in many industrial plants today.

MANAGEMENT CONTROL VERSUS WORKER HEALTH: SOME HISTORY

In 1906 serious work accidents reached a peak in the steel, railroading, and mining industries which were in the forefront of American economic expansion. One study of work accidents documented 526 work-related fatalities, more than one a day, for the year 1906–1907 in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, alone. At the time, industry and government sources agreed that the new class of immigrant workers were responsible for the high accident rate. This excerpt from a government report on mining accidents was typical:

The responsibility for accidents rests in most cases with the men injured. . . . They know little or nothing of rock formations, of fire damp, of the properties of coal dust, and of the handling of explosives—matters about which every coal miner should be thoroughly informed. To determine whether a piece of slate or roof is or is not likely to fall often requires a
considerable degree of experience, and the majority of Slavs, Magyars, and
Italians have not this experience. . . .

Another way of interpreting this information would be to say that the
deskilling of craft workers that took place in this industry in the late 1800s
created a situation where the new mass-production workers no longer had
the knowledge to protect themselves.

The impact of this deskilling process on worker health can still be seen
today. In most modern work settings, the individual worker has little knowl-
edge of, or control over, the total work process—not even enough to take
the kind of precautions that he or she would normally take if placed in a
potentially dangerous situation outside the workplace. The less knowledge
and control workers have over the labor process, the more certain one can
be that accidents will occur. In another sense these are not accidents at all
but an inherent part of the capitalist labor process where workers no longer
have the basic protection of controlling their own environment.

In this way the fatal accident that occurred at the Tannery can be viewed
as historically specific. It could not have occurred if it had not been for the
deskilling that had taken place in the leather industry.

THE ROOTS OF MANAGEMENT SAFETY PRACTICES

At the turn of the century there was a growing anti-corporate sentiment
in this country and labor was moving to organize in basic industry. Manage-
ment, first in steel, then in other industries, began to experiment with new
ways to simultaneously improve its public image, undermine worker resist-
ance, and increase its control of the labor process. Aggressive public-
relations campaigns, pension plans, stock subscription programs, as well as
Taylorism and scientific management programs, were all part of this
process. So were the safety programs that began to proliferate at this time.

Facing organizing drives, an extremely high accident rate, and a nega-
tive public image, the United States Steel Corporation began a safety drive
in 1906 that soon developed into a national movement. Judge Elbert Gary,
chief executive of U.S. Steel promised his board of directors, “If you will
back us in it, we’ll make it pay.” Gary established safety committees to
inspect each plant and make recommendations on possible improvements.
In a move that anticipated the development of company unions several years
later, Gary selected small numbers of workers to participate on those
committees in many plants. Several of the largest corporations in the
country soon developed safety programs based on the model developed at
U.S. Steel. Anticipating the introduction of state workmen’s compensation
laws, U.S. Steel then introduced its own compensation plan in 1910 with the
provision that injured employees or their families received payment for job
injuries, irrespective of liability, unless they sued the corporation. By 1915
every industrial state in the country had some type of workmen's compensation law along the lines of the U.S. Steel plan.19

As soon as the workers' compensation laws transferred the financial burden of industrial accidents from workers to management, industrial safety programs blossomed into a nationwide "Safety First" movement.10 The focus was on warning against carelessness on the part of workers. Despite the fact that the large corporations were now ready to pay for industrial accidents (in exchange for not getting sued), they were not ready to assume moral responsibility for those accidents. In 1920 the Bureau of Safety of U.S. Steel claimed that 90 percent of the work accidents it had studied were caused by the inefficiency of the workers.12 The insurance industry helped to create and develop the National Safety Council during this period. It quickly became industry's spokesperson on issues of industrial safety and remains so today.

During this period, the insurance industry laid the ideological groundwork for present-day management attitudes toward safety. (The ideology that workers cause accidents only began to develop after skilled workers had lost their control over the labor process.) In 1931, H. W. Heinrich of Travelers Insurance Company published what was to become a standard textbook of industrial safety.13 First conceived in the early 1920s, *Industrial Accident Prevention: A Scientific Approach* has been reprinted in five editions, the latest in 1980.

Heinrich's contribution was to recognize that industrial safety is inextricably tied to control of the labor process. "Accident prevention," he wrote, "is both science and art. It represents above all other things, control of man performance, machine performance, and physical environment."14 Heinrich spent his whole career developing the argument that workers, not machines, are the main cause of accidents, with the corollary that management is also at fault for not controlling the actions of workers more closely. This is the basis for his four basic theorems that make up the "domino sequence of industrial accidents."

These theorems show that (1) industrial injuries result only from accidents [note here that Heinrich completely ignores the whole issue of occupational diseases they may be built into the labor process]; (2) accidents are invariably caused by unsafe acts of persons or by exposure to unsafe mechanical conditions; (3) unsafe actions and conditions are caused only by fault of persons; and (4) faults of persons are created by environment or acquired by inheritance.

From this sequence of steps in the occurrence of accidental injury it is apparent that man failure is the heart of the problem. Equally apparent is the conclusion that methods of control must be directed toward man failure.15

Heinrich's theories became popular with industry because they provided another argument for consolidating management of the labor process,
at a time when workers were actively resisting that control. His theories came on the heels of Fredrick Taylor's theories of scientific management and were received by management in much the same spirit. Taylor himself recognized safety as an essential aspect of industrial planning. Heinrich's approach played down the acquisition of expensive equipment and the need to redesign the labor process to make it safe. Like Taylor, Heinrich emphasized instead that gains would come out of closer and closer control of every movement that workers make. He wrote:

The causes of accidents are identical with the causes of inefficient production [and] the remedies are similar and may be applied by the same persons. Thus in the work of identifying and eliminating the causes of accidents, we are simultaneously improving industrial productivity.

In other words, it is the capitalist's job to extract labor from workers; if the capitalist is at all lax in this process, workers will resist and cause production to be inefficient and accidents to occur.

Heinrich's theories were important for the insurance industry as well, because they provided a basis for intervening into the manufacturing process without pitting safety against profits. The focus was workers, not equipment.

Heinrich also aided the insurance industry immensely by establishing a clear demarcation between worker safety, which industry was prepared to assume the financial risk for, and worker health, which it was not. Chronic health problems caused by exposure to industrial toxins clearly do not fit into Heinrich's theorems, and it is on this basis that the insurance industry has actively fought compensation for occupational disease from exposure to silica, asbestos, and cotton dust. The theoretical demarcation between health and safety was so widely accepted that even today, all government OSHA offices are broken down into separate divisions for safety and health. Similarly, health and safety professionals are trained in either health or in safety, but almost never in both.

THE LIMITATIONS OF SAFETY IDEOLOGY

Today Heinrich's theories still form the theoretical basis for many of management (and insurance company) responses to occupational health and safety issues. Heinrich's theories have survived, essentially intact, far longer than the principles of scientific management on which they were at least partially based. Nevertheless, workers' expanded conception of their basic rights as well as the rapid changes that have occurred in the labor process since World War II, now threaten management's ability to keep the lid on health and safety issues. As the split widens between the managers who plan work, and the workers who execute it, workers find it more and more difficult to accept the notion that management should organize and
control the labor process but that labor should take responsibility for accidents.

In addition, the same technological breakthroughs that have been at the heart of American industrial expansion since World War II now threaten to explode the already delicate legitimation crisis that management is facing. The introduction of thousands of toxic chemicals like kepone, DBCP, and vinyl chloride into the lives of American workers without effective safeguards has created an epidemic of occupational and environmental disease. No one can predict the full impact of that epidemic; each new set of epidemiologic studies seems to identify new high-risk groups. The chronic diseases caused by toxic chemicals do not readily fit into the safety ideology that management has operated under for the past 50 years. In contrast to work accidents, it is extremely difficult to make workers accept the blame for chronic diseases caused by chemicals that they watched management introduce into the labor process.

In many ways the rigidity of the safety ideology created by the insurance companies accounts for the multiplying problems that industry faces in responding to health and safety challenges. The rest of this paper will focus on the contradictions and limits of management response to health and safety in the Tannery.

THE BREAKDOWN OF SAFETY IDEOLOGY WITHIN THE TANNERY

Once a month the Tannery management, foremen, and the insurance company representatives meet in a nearby country club for lunch and a safety meeting. The insurance company reduces the Tannery's workers' compensation premiums for holding these meetings. During one of these meetings, the owner of the Tannery stood up and revealed management's real orientation to health issues:

This safety thing can be exaggerated. There are always some people who are going to have bad reactions to a condition—for example, a rash. But if it's the condition and not the person, why doesn't everyone exposed get the rash? When people get scared about health and safety they start to run like a bunch of turkeys—and then they do something really stupid—and back themselves into a corner and get themselves in real trouble unrelated to the hazard they panicked over in the first place.

Everyone assumes the Tannery is going to be dangerous so at the slightest thing they get hysterical. Every time I take a group of high school students around, at least two or three girls get hysterical and faint. And this health and safety thing is the same for the employees.

The Tannery spends a lot of money on workers' compensation insurance: over $400,000 a year. For this money the insurance company provides technical expertise in setting up a safety program and pays out all successful workers' compensation claims.
In one sense both the Tannery management and the insurance company have a financial stake in reducing occupational hazards so that compensation costs—either in premiums or as reimbursement—are minimized. Yet both management and the insurance carrier have distinct limits on how far they are willing to go in order to minimize those hazards. As I have tried to point out, management’s goal is to minimize the amount of money spent on safety. The insurance company has to be very careful not to suggest “impractical” changes like purchasing or replacing major pieces of equipment or machinery that would be viewed as unnecessarily expensive. It also has to be careful not to suggest changes in the way work is done that might threaten management’s prerogative of controlling the labor process. Ironically these constraints also prevent the insurance company from effectively spotting or challenging the most significant workplace hazards. This is one of the reasons why the Tannery has switched its insurance carrier several times during the last few years. Two different insurance companies represented the Tannery in the short period of time I worked there.

The first company had a three-pronged approach. Each month it presented management with a list of the previous month’s accidents to review. It also gave management a 10 percent discount on the premium for holding monthly safety meetings among top management personnel and setting up a “workmen’s committee” that submits monthly recommendations. (As far as I could tell, this second committee just existed on paper.) The insurance company also posted safety posters throughout the plant. These posters had the same clear message: workers—in particular, careless workers—cause accidents. Each major area of the shop had posters prominently displayed that admonished the people working there with slogans like “The Best Safety Device Is a Careful Man” or “Tools Don’t Cause Accidents. It’s How They Are Used.” None of these approaches were particularly effective in reducing accidents, however.

The second company promised the Tannery a more aggressive approach in reducing accidents that was “especially designed to help reduce insurance and production costs and improve employee morale at the same time.” This did not mean reorganizing the work to make it more safe. Instead (as the promotional literature proudly explained) it meant taking steps such as insisting that injured workers see an insurance-company doctor before seeing their own doctor, pressuring injured workers to return to work early, and making sure that disabled workers were immediately visited by an insurance company representative because “if we show that we are concerned about his welfare and answer any questions he might have, the injured employee is much less likely to turn to an attorney for advice, advice which ultimately costs management money.”

In an attempt to control the rising accident rate the insurance company set up a process where foremen were held responsible for accidents in their department, on the theory that the foremen were in a position to control the
labor process and reduce accidents. They weren't. The program did not cut the accident rate but did stir up a lot of resentment among foremen who saw themselves caught between management's constant production push on the one hand, and its lip service to safety on the other.

Unable to reduce accidents with any of these measures, the insurance company and the Tannery management initiated an employee “safety contest” with great fanfare. Every worker was rewarded with $5 worth of Safeway grocery coupons if his or her department had less than the usual number of lost-time accidents in a month. This had the effect of encouraging workers not to report “minor” injuries and pitting the injured workers against the people they were working with. (Someone with a slight back injury or cut might get pressured into ignoring the injury in order to have his or her department qualify for the coupons.) Although the number of actual accidents was not reduced, the contest did reduce the number of reported accidents each month. Yet in order to accomplish this, both management and the insurance company also exposed how shallow their commitment to improving health and safety conditions really is. As Woods, the Tannery plant engineer, stated, “No one at the Tannery has ever changed a procedure simply because of health and safety.”

The huge discrepancy between the lofty way safety is discussed by management and the lowly place it really occupies in industrial planning creates a deep ambivalence in the people responsible for it. As Woods told me:

> The issue of health and safety is an emotional issue. The impact of seeing someone you work with lose a finger really can’t be measured. . . . Ideally you’d want to spend as much time and money as was necessary on health and safety but if you did maybe you couldn’t run a business.

Typical of the small decisions that affect worker health in the long run was the decision by Tannery management to start using sulfahydrate in liquid rather than dust form. The liquid form was cheaper and better suited for a semi-automated system that management had installed. Yet the liquid is much more dangerous because it always gives off small amounts of hydrogen sulfide gas, which has been shown to cause chronic lung disease.

The problem here, from management's point of view, is that workers begin to stop believing that management has their best interests at heart once the negative consequences of this type of decision ever become obvious.

Several different Tannery workers seemed to enjoy telling the story of the run-in with management over the new silicone treatment process. The Tannery was trying out a new way to treat and waterproof the hides with silicone and with perchloroethylene, which is the solvent dry cleaners use. Perchloroethylene is now suspected of being a cancer-causing substance.¹⁹ The workers who were told to do the operation started to complain of
headaches and dizziness, but Woods, the plant engineer, insisted the operation was completely safe. A few days later, Woods had the trailer which serves as his office moved further away from the operation because he was getting headaches. When the workers confronted him about moving the office, he again insisted the operation was completely safe. Then one worker asked: “If it is so safe, why does it say Danger—Prolonged Exposure May Cause Death on the drum it came in?” The company still refused to make changes in the operation, so the workers called OSHA in. OSHA measured the levels of perchloroethylene which were five times the highest allowable limit and made the company install some big fans. Soon after, the company discontinued the operation because it hadn’t been worth it.

This incident and several other cases where the Tannery management skimped on safety equipment caused one of the union representatives to say, “When you tell me Woods says it is safe, I don’t know what that means—sometimes it just means it’s too expensive to fix it.”

In order for control to be effective, workers have to believe in management’s desire and ability to act in the worker’s best interests. Yet, in a place like the Tannery, workers have to wonder whether management is even capable of organizing the labor process in any way that does not put short-term cost-cutting as its immediate goal.

WORKERS’ RESPONSE

Despite the dangerous working conditions at the Tannery and management’s callous stance toward health and safety problems, the Tannery workers have not developed a collective way to fight for a safer workplace.

In part this is because many workers have—to a certain extent—accepted management’s safety ideology. On several different occasions workers told me that the biggest hazard on their job was “people making stupid mistakes.” When I would ask questions about whether production pressures or other management shortcuts ever forced mistakes Tannery workers often told me they didn’t. One maintenance worker told me, “Sure, Lester [the owner of the company] cuts corners here and there—but then again, he is in business and doesn’t do anything I wouldn’t do if I were in his position.” While discussing the “accident” and the hydrogen sulfide gas hazard at the Tannery, one worker told me: “The good thing about this Tannery is the ventilation,” referring to the fact that the mixing area and parts of chrometan are outside. “If the mill had not been exposed, eight men instead of two might have died last year.”

For some workers the dangers were so omnipresent that they became just part of the job. “There’s no two ways about it, factory work is dangerous and factory work is boring,” the union president told me philosophically after explaining how he had recently lost the end of his finger in a machine.

In addition to the many psychological factors that played into the situation, there were also several important structural reasons why Tannery
workers had not collectively pushed for better health and safety conditions in the plant.

Management repression played a role in undercutting resistance. As one worker told me, "The company always tells you about all your benefits and medical coverage [for work-related injuries] but if you try to use it you won't get advanced. Most of the Mexican workers who work here have learned that if you are quiet, you rise quickly." Referring to Tannery workers' reluctance to push for better health and safety conditions, one militant worker in the union told me, "People working here know that there's only one other place in town—the Cement Company—that pays as well as the Tannery and they don't want to risk losing their job."

In most industries, having a union is a crucial protection for workers who want to improve their health and safety conditions. Yet as recently as last year the Tannery union was so weak that no union representative accompanied the OSHA people on their inspection of the plant after "the accident," or participated in the closing conference where the results of OSHA's investigation were reviewed.

According to Bob, the president of the union, the main reason for the weakness of the union even though it had been in the Tannery a long time was that "it was a company union. It's kind of a carrot and stick situation where they really have you by the balls—hanging all these rewards in front of you. Many of the union presidents (in the past) ended up being foremen. . . . I've been trying to make this a real union."

Yet in the area of health and safety, the union was doing very little. Bob told me that he thought that "health and safety really isn't an issue at the Tannery because the Company is quite safety-conscious and John is quite flexible about those issues." For the most part the union allowed the management safety committee and John Woods to set policy on health and safety issues. The parallel worker safety committee was entirely inactive as far as I could tell, simply a device for the company to get a discount on workers' compensation insurance. Bob explained to me that he was on the plant's safety committee but couldn't really say that he knew what was going on. He had not read OSHA's report on the silicone operation several weeks after it had been issued.

Racism played an important role in keeping the union weak. Attendance at union meetings was extremely poor. Nearly all those who came were white workers from the "dry-end departments." The union contract divides the workforce into three parts: the wet end, the dry end, and maintenance. The wet end of the plant includes the mixing and chrometan departments where the hides are first converted into leather. The dry-end departments involve finishing operations where the leather is cut, polished, and coated. Everyone in the Tannery acknowledges that the most tiring and dangerous work in the Tannery is performed in the wet end. It is also the area of the plant where minority workers—predominantly Chicano, but also black, Vietnamese, and Portuguese—are concentrated.
The department (as opposed to plantwide) seniority system set up in the union contract greatly contributes to the racial division within the plant. As one Chicano worker in chrometan explained it to me, this occurs as a three-step process: (1) Because the work in the wet end is so hard and so dangerous, there is a high turnover rate there and a much lower turnover rate in the dry end. (2) Glad to be working in an area with other workers from the same ethnic group who speak their language, many of the minority workers initially assigned to the wet end do not want to move when their 90-day initiation periods ends. In contrast, at least half of the white workers initially assigned to chrometan apply to be transferred to the dry end at this time. (3) Minority workers who feel more comfortable after a period of time like a year, can only transfer to the dry end by forfeiting the seniority time they have accumulated.

The sharp division in the workforce, created in part by the seniority system, undercuts the union’s strength in a cyclical fashion. The union fought for the issues most pressing to their primary constituents—workers in the dry end. For example, because the dry end was mostly a piecework system, the union fought hard to prevent the rates from being slashed or the piecework system abolished as management repeatedly threatened to do. For many dry-end workers, health and safety was a problem viewed as facing workers in the other end of the plant, and consequently health and safety issues were not pushed by the union. Yet the union’s neglect of those same issues meant that wet-end workers had little incentive to join the union.

Despite the serious weaknesses that plagued the union, a rather remarkable understanding exists among some Tannery workers. One maintenance worker told me, “There are times when I think a condition is unsafe and I simply refuse to work in the area—I don’t care what anybody tells me because it’s not worth it.”

Another production worker told me, “At the Tannery you don’t have to do something if you don’t want to.” “What happens?” I asked. “Nothing, you just don’t do it. Sure you get some pressure put on you but the union will step up for you.” Another worker standing there said, “I remember when I refused to drive a heister [forklift] when the company said I had to even though it zig-zagged because the steering was all fucked up. You’d have to be pretty stupid to work with something you thought was dangerous.”

In other words, some workers have individually established the right to refuse work they consider unsafe. Given management’s insistence on controlling the labor process, this represents a considerable degree of resistance. Despite the obvious weakness of the union, some workers feel confident in their ability to assert this right and get whatever backing they need from the union.

These acts of individual resistance are tolerated by the Tannery management for two reasons. First of all, if workers have the right to refuse unsafe work, they have to assume more responsibility if they get hurt doing
work they agreed to do. For example, after Tannery management put in a fleshing machine that could handle a whole hide rather than half of a hide, there was a large jump in the number of back injuries because, rather than automatically station two people to handle the hides where before there had been one, it was left up to the individual worker's judgment whether he wanted more help with a particular hide (the hides vary from 50 to 150 pounds).

The one reason this refusal of unsafe work is acceptable to management is because it is an individual act. This was most graphically represented to men when the union president told me that he himself wouldn't operate the machine the black man working next to him was using. He explained that it had a chipped rotor and was therefore very dangerous. Missing was a sense of the union's collective responsibility for determining whether working conditions are safe. Nevertheless, management is walking on a dangerous tight rope when it tolerates individual worker resistance. Invariably the day will come when several workers will decide to walk off the job together.

After a longstanding dispute about the safety of the brakes on the mills that mix the chemicals (which half a dozen people work on at a time), the workers in that department, backed by the union, shut the operation down. One worker, particularly excited, told me:

We locked the Mill out last week [and the owner] Lester, he went apeshit."

CONCLUSION

Health and safety issues are important because they constantly threaten to raise the issue of who controls the organization of the labor process.

Industrial safety has been used as a force to co-opt workers' concerns about the way their work is organized. Safety has been also used to focus attention on individual workers' responsibilities for accidents and to divert attention away from management's role in planning and directing the labor process.

At the same time management's refusal to take real responsibility for protecting workers' health—particularly for chronic health conditions—has opened the issue of whether worker control of the labor process is the only way workers can be assured that their health will be protected. This is particularly true because many of the technological advances industry has made since World War II have also carried new potential dangers for the people who work with them.

Occupational health issues have a tendency to affect large numbers of workers over long periods of time and therefore are potentially powerful issues to organize around. In contrast, occupational-safety issues are more often (though not always) focused on an individual worker, on an individual machine, for a brief moment. By battling out occupational health issues on the terrain of safety, management has been able to keep worker resistance
individuated. Yet ironically, at the same time, management's refusal to take worker health seriously has left open the possibility that workers may collectively demand the knowledge and the power to design the labor process with their own needs in mind.

That possibility remains far in the future. In the meantime, current struggles to create active union safety committees with the right to shut down dangerous work, and the right to know every chemical that is being used in the labor process, are small but significant steps in the long journey toward a democratic workplace.

NOTES

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2. Typical questions were: "What is a warning sign that an area where you work is so noisy you might be losing your hearing?"; "If you start to develop a skin rash, what should you do?"; "If you discover an unsafe condition while doing your job, what should you do?"


11. Ibid., p. 167.


15. Ibid., pp. 1-2.


18. In the preface of the 5th (1980) edition of Heinrich's book, Dan Peterson, a safety management consultant, and Nestor Roos, professor of insurance and director of safety management for the University of Arizona's Center for Occupational Safety and Health, write: "Few of us perhaps realize just how influential this book was. It was and still is the basis for almost everything that has been done in industrial safety programming from the date it was written until today. *Industrial Accident Prevention* was the only text in industrial safety that laid down principles: and those principles still guide practitioners today" (italics added).


20. Work in the wet end involves continuous heavy lifting as the hides are loaded and unloaded in and out of huge mills where they are chemically treated. It also involves frequent exposure to various solutions of caustic chemicals, ammonia fumes, low levels (and potentially high levels) of hydrogen sulfide gas. It also involves continuous exposures to various chromate solutions that may very well be cancer-causing. See W.M. Gafafer, *Health of Workers in Chromate Producing Industry: A Study*, Public Health Service Pub. No. 192 (Washington D.C., n.d. [1950s]).

21. Although the Supreme Court ruled in favor of workers' right to refuse unsafe work in their Whirlpool decision last year, the impact of that ruling remains unclear on the shop floor. The issue is—what is considered an imminent danger that justifies workers refusal to work as opposed to an everyday hazard that can be worked out in normal management-labor negotiation. Every day these issues are raised in different types of workplaces all over the country and resolved according to the level of worker organization and strength in a particular workplace. Given the general weakness of the Tannery union, these incidents of refusing to work unsafe jobs seemed very bold.

22. Two key objectives of the COSH movement have been to give workers the right to know the substance that they are working with and to establish strong worker health and safety committees in every workplace. (COSH groups are coalitions of workers, unions, and professionals that now exist in some 15 or 16 geographic areas of the United States. Some of the largest COSH groups have over 50 local union sponsors.)