



Labor unions have pushed for safer and healthier worker conditions for nearly a century, leading up to the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970. This legislation marked a “huge turning point that set uniform standards across the country and leveled the playing field for businesses,” notes Kevin Riley, research director for UCLA’s Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program.

Among its provisions, the law established a federal agency (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration—OSHA) to enforce worker safety standards. The statistics bear out the agency’s success: between 1970 and 2014, workplace fatalities dropped by two-thirds, from 38 a day to 13.¹ One particularly memorable example in which OSHA minimized workplace dangers was at the World Trade Center recovery site after 9/11. Together with labor unions, construction contractors and New York City employees, OSHA collected 6,500 air and bulk samples for testing, and distributed 131,000 respirators, 11,000 hard hats, 13,000 pairs of safety glasses and more than 21,000 pairs of protective gloves to workers on the site.²

Yet with only about 2,200 OSHA inspectors to oversee the health and safety of 130 million workers at more than 8 million workplaces nationwide, there is a limit to its capacity to identify problems and ensure employer compliance. This underscores the important role of labor unions in providing worker protection, advocating for worker rights and giving workers an outlet for their grievances.

So what if unions suddenly disappeared? What would be the impact on safety and health standards, both to workers and the public more generally?



Labor unions help set the agenda

“Labor unions play a critical role in bringing issues to light and getting new standards on the agenda,” notes Mr. Riley. He and Valarie Long, executive vice president for the Service Employees International Union, cite the growing pressure by nurses in California and other service employees to prevent workplace violence by patients and visitors. “When workers come together,” Ms. Long says, “they find out what they need to deal with” and that can include issues “we didn’t plan to talk about.”

During and after the Ebola virus scare in 2014, for example, healthcare workers as well as airplane cabin cleaners, wheelchair attendants and baggage handlers began talking about their fears. “They told us they were not prepared and employers were not telling them what to do,” Ms. Long explains. “They talked

about the need to train workers in emergency situations, such as Ebola and a broader range of infectious diseases.” That led to the union organizing training sessions for airport workers, including janitorial staff and security officers.

Rising risks when businesses cut corners

Even with federal protections, workplace safety would be put at risk in the absence of unions as businesses cut corners to drive profits. This might include failing to provide adequate training or to follow safety procedures at construction sites. In 2012, for example, 79% of fatal falls in New York City occurred at non-union construction sites.³

Indeed, the reliance on temporary workers and independent contractors combined with intensified competition for jobs has created more precarious work situations. This more vulnerable landscape illustrates how the disappearance of unions would exacerbate already dangerous workplace environments such as those in mining, oil refining and manufacturing.

“Unions help workers identify potential problems and negotiate with employers to find and fix hazards, and they can support workers in filing complaints when appropriate,” notes Mr. Riley. “They can also serve as watchdogs to be sure employers don’t retaliate against workers for raising issues. This all happens at the day-to-day shop level.”

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Kevin Riley, Research Director, UCLA

The importance of enforcement

The disappearance of a union safety net would discourage workers from voicing their concerns. Workers are “often afraid to come forward because they are afraid of losing their jobs,” Mr. Riley notes. Also, without unions employers would be more likely to skip safety steps or improperly report injuries or safety infractions.

For example, in 2014 a Los Angeles airport worker died while driving a baggage tractor, an extremely hazardous job. The employer said the worker was not wearing a safety belt, which is not uncommon among workers rushing to load planes before their departures. OSHA investigated and found not only that part of the seat belt was missing, but also that the employer had falsely reported that the worker’s cause of death was a heart attack.

Consider also the reality for farmworkers. OSHA identified 5,200 cases of acute pesticide-related illness and eight deaths in 11 states between 1998 and 2006.⁴ However, these were only cases confirmed by doctors, and many workers—especially those on worker visas or who are undocumented—are scared to report

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Service Employees International Union

problems or seek medical help. Beyond these fears, a lack of legal protections enables employers to skirt safety standards.

As a 2016 Associated Press review of federal and state data revealed, investigations of pesticide safety often take years to complete, fines are rare, compliance may be voluntary and workers hesitate to speak up if their anonymity is jeopardized. “The official data we have on worker injuries rely largely on employer reports, and hospital and workers’ compensation records,” notes Mr. Riley. “It’s widely understood that injuries are under-reported.”

If unions disappeared, the impact of these and other risks would reverberate to surrounding communities. Consider the challenges for public safety if the workers responsible for putting out fires, policing the streets or responding to other emergencies are increasingly distracted by deteriorating working conditions and the loss of attractive benefits.

Beyond the essential role of encouraging and helping enforce basic health and safety standards, Ms. Long describes how unions have long advocated for a more just society that confronts issues like income inequality, environmental destruction and institutional racism. “Movements create change,” she says, noting the intersection of the labor movement and the civil rights movement in the 1960s. “We believe workers and communities are strengthened by working together and having a collective voice. We have to build a wider movement.”

Sources

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