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Worker Action in the Warehouse Industry

“We're expected to move up to three hundred boxes an hour….and we get no breaks to get water.” Marta Medina, a warehouse worker trained as a worker health and safety specialist by UCLA-LOSH, testified about extreme temperatures, unsafe machinery and production pressures before members of the California Assembly Committee on Labor and Employment in Sacramento.

Cal/OSHA Chief Ellen Widess described the warehouse industry as one of the most hazardous in the state, involving complex work and demanding production schedules. The Committee hearing on contingent work illustrated the potential lack of accountability for workers’ health and safety when large retailers create demands that require unsafe line speeds; when employers hire temporary workers who are easily replaced when injured; when staffing agencies send workers to job sites with little to no training; and when workers refrain from reporting injuries and safety violations for fear of losing their jobs.

LOSH Director Linda Delp testified about the increased risks facing contingent workers. “Workers know the hazards firsthand and must be able to report them without fear of reprisals.” California Labor Commissioner Julie Su and the Division of Labor Standards Enforcement are actively investigating complaints of retaliation against workers who have filed the safety and wage-theft complaints.

Workers have confronted the abuses in the warehouse industry. After 2 years of health and safety training with LOSH staff and working closely with Warehouse Workers United, workers employed at a warehouse facility in Chino, CA filed a complaint with Cal/OSHA. Deogracia Cornelio, LOSH Associate Director of Education, said “We have seen workers like Marta confront their fears and have seen the impact when they speak up – in the workplace and in Sacramento.”

The subsequent Cal/OSHA investigation led to more than 40 citations at four worksites and over $256,000 in fines. Cal/OSHA cited both the warehouse company and the staffing agency that recruited workers for the facility, a ground-breaking citation that holds both parties responsible.
**Action Summit on Worker Safety and Health**

More than 400 people converged on East L.A. College for an “Action Summit on Worker Health and Safety” sponsored by the U.S. Dept. of Labor and OSHA in coordination with UCLA-LOSH and the L.A. County Federation of Labor. During her keynote address U.S. Labor Secretary Hilda Solis acknowledged California’s leading role in promoting worker health and safety and described LOSH as “one of the most important workplace safety centers in the nation for the last 34 years.”

Speakers at the April 26th Summit, one of multiple events leading up to Workers’ Memorial Day, urged workers to exercise their rights to a safe job. In the opening remarks, Maria Elena Durazo, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, spoke about carwash, warehouse, hotel, airport, healthcare, and recycling workers when affirming that “workers right here in LA are fighting for safe jobs.”

During the Summit Secretary Solis took the opportunity to announce the launch of a national public awareness campaign to protect America’s construction workers from deadly falls. “This campaign will prevent injuries and deaths. Every construction worker who steps foot on a roof, scaffold or ladder has a legal right to get the proper safety equipment and training,” she stated.

In the panel “Making a Difference: Voices from the Workplace” Argelia Rico, a hotel housekeeper, spoke about the “safety” incentive program at a national hotel chain, where workers at hotels that don’t report lost workdays due to injuries or illness are eligible to win prizes—anything from an automobile to $25,000 in cash. Ms. Rico described how the program “makes workers afraid to file a claim, discourages them from reporting accidents, and keeps them silent.” LOSH director Linda Delp, moderating a panel of state and federal agency representatives, asserted that “incentives should be given to workers who report hazards, not used to discourage workers from reporting injuries”.

In reality, too many workers lose their jobs when they speak up about hazards, a problem Cal/OSHA Chief Ellen Widess and Labor Commissioner Julie Su committed to address across their agencies. “We are aware that workers who filed complaints with DOSH have been laid-off” Widess said, and consequently, other workers are reluctant to complain. “We are trying very hard to break the cycle of abuses of worker health and safety, particularly facing the most vulnerable workers.”

Visit OSHA’s “Fall Prevention Campaign” webpage at: [http://www.osha.gov/stopfalls/](http://www.osha.gov/stopfalls/) for educational materials and resources.

**From Agriculture to Asphalt: LOSH Leads Fight to Prevent Heat Illness**

A forthcoming article by LOSH staff Kevin Riley, Linda Delp, Deogracia Cornelio and Sarah Jacobs describes LOSH’s Southern California campaign to prevent heat illness and deaths. It highlights the role of worker leadership through “Train the Trainer” programs, the role of health promoters in providing essential information to workers, and the importance of building community capacity to educate and support workers who may be denied their right to “water, rest and shade” in temperatures that often reach triple digits. Look for the upcoming special issue of New Solutions on innovative worker education programs.
OHIP Interns Support Groundbreaking Campaigns

Toxic chemicals, workplace violence, disabling injuries, limited access to restrooms – these are just some of the hazards students will tackle during this year’s Occupational Health Internship Program (OHIP). Working with labor, worker centers, clinics and community groups, interns across the country learn from workers about their jobs, help document injuries and illness, and support campaigns and policy change.

In June, 25 interns from around the country gathered in Los Angeles where UCLA-LOSH hosted the national orientation program. They learned firsthand from worksite visits at apparel manufacturing, industrial laundry and construction sites. They heard from workers and former interns active in campaigns to improve conditions in the car wash, waste recycling, TV cable installation and warehouse industries. Karla Dominguez, a 2011 intern, was accompanied by her father, a warehouse worker who was fired a week after suffering a debilitating injury in a warehouse facility. She described her experience: “OHIP helped me realize what my dad endured on the job…I broke down at one point because I was seeing what he went through and how many other people are affected.” The internships run through August 15, and a select group of interns will present their projects at the American Public Health Association conference this fall in San Francisco.

Many thanks to NIOSH and the California Wellness Foundation for their ongoing support of the OHIP program.

Over 4500 Preventable Workplace Fatalities

Internationally recognized Workers’ Memorial Day was honored in L.A on April 28th with tributes, testimony, theater, and song – commemorating the 4500 U.S. workers who lost their lives on the job during 2011. Street theater performed by “Teatro Jornaleros Sin Fronteras” depicted the daily hazards of day laborers and their campaign for basic rights and protection; Peter Califano, a longshore worker, gave a moving tribute to his brother-in-law, killed on the docks; Alfredo Rodriguez, an airport worker, sang an original song highlighting the universal struggle for workers’ rights; and speaker Debra Lee of Cal/OSHA described efforts to guarantee workers’ rights to safe and healthful working conditions. The event, sponsored by SoCalCOSH and UCLA-LOSH, drew more than 250 people from worker centers, the labor community, schools, government, and the public.
The UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health (LOSH) Program is a nationally recognized center with a special emphasis on serving the Southern California workforce. LOSH provides bi-lingual (English-Spanish) occupational health and safety education programs in the community; teaches UCLA courses; researches the conditions of immigrant, low-wage and young workers who are disproportionately impacted by job hazards; and provides input into public policies to improve worker health and safety.

LOSH is part of UCLA’s Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) within the College of Letters and Science and the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health (COEH) within the School of Public Health. Founded in 1978 and now celebrating more than 30 years of service, LOSH has established a strong presence in Southern California, with ties to local and international labor unions, community groups, schools, local and state governmental agencies, and community health providers.

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