

Doing it Old School: Peer-led occupational safety training in the U.S. construction Industry

Comme dans l'ancien temps : la formation en sécurité au travail offerte par les pairs dans l'industrie de la construction aux États-unis

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Article abstract

Many labour organizations that sponsor occupational health and safety training champion “peer training,” preferring instructors drawn from the shopfloor over academically credentialed experts. But peer training is hardly new: in the skilled trades, master craftsmen have instructed apprentices since the Middle Ages. Building on the apprenticeship model of education, the U.S.-based construction unions have created a network of more than 4,000 peer trainers who provide occupational health and safety training to up to 100,000 men and women in the building trades each year.

DOING IT OLD SCHOOL: PEER-LED OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY TRAINING IN THE U.S. CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT. Many labour organizations that sponsor occupational health and safety training champion “peer training,” preferring instructors drawn from the shopfloor over academically credentialed experts. But peer training is hardly new: in the skilled trades, master craftsmen have instructed apprentices since the Middle Ages. Building on the apprenticeship model of education, the U.S.-based construction unions have created a network of more than 4,000 peer trainers who provide occupational health and safety training to up to 100,000 men and women in the building trades each year.

COMME DANS L'ANCIEN TEMPS : LA FORMATION EN SÉCURITÉ AU TRAVAIL OFFERTE PAR LES PAIRS DANS L'INDUSTRIE DE LA CONSTRUCTION AUX ÉTATS-UNIS

RÉSUMÉ. Plusieurs syndicats offrant des formations en santé et en sécurité au travail valorisent la formation par les pairs et favorisent l'embauche de formateurs issus du plancher de l'usine, au détriment d'experts universitaires. Or, cette façon de faire n'est pas récente. En effet, dans le domaine des métiers spécialisés, les artisans forment les apprentis depuis l'époque du Moyen Âge. Se basant sur le modèle éducationnel de compagnonnage, les associations syndicales du domaine de la construction ont créé un réseau regroupant plus de 4 000 formateurs-travailleurs qui donnent une formation en santé et sécurité au travail à plus de 100 000 travailleurs et travailleuses du domaine de la construction par année.

Union-driven, peer-led outreach training has featured prominently in US labour's occupational health movement at least as far back as 1978, when the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) began supporting such activity under its “New Directions” grant program. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) supports an even greater volume of this activity through programs dedicated to training workers in the safe handling of hazardous materials. In 2010, OSHA reported that the New Direc-

tions program (now renamed the Susan Harwood Training Grant Program) awarded US\$10.7 million in grants, reaching 65,732 workers; NIEHS funded \$36 million in worker training that reached 217,419.¹

The Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), more than any other US labour organization, is associated with the birth and popularization of the modern peer-led model for worker safety and health training. OCAW Secretary-Treasurer Tony Mazzocchi, legendary for his role in pressing for the Occupational Safety and Health Act that created OSHA and for his association with the martyred Karen Silkwood, worked with New York's Labor Institute to theorize and develop a remarkable method for worker education.

In the late 19th century, industrialization brought many new technologies into use in the workplace, with important consequences for the division of labour. Frederick Winslow Taylor, the founder of scientific management, became a spokesman for the idea that new conditions required decisions be reserved to those with extensive technical education. As Taylor (1911/1998) explained, "the science which underlies each workman's act is so great that the workman is incapable, either through lack of education or insufficient mental capacity, of fully understanding the science" (p. 18). It was the responsibility of managers to give directions and workers to obey. Occupational safety training under this scheme called for academically credentialed experts in industrial hygiene to draft policies and lecture the workforce on following them.

The OCAW activists believed that this attitude was not just anti-labour, but counterproductive from an occupational safety standpoint (Merrill, 1994; Renner, 2004; Slatin, 2001). They were convinced that workers understood a great deal about their workplaces that credentialed experts did not, that unaddressed hazards rather than worker error were responsible for most accidents, and that the passivity inculcated by Taylorism prevented workers from acting to address these hazards. OCAW recruited safety advocates from the ranks of union workers on the job for a "train-the-trainer" program. They did not become full-time safety professionals, but returned to the factory and periodically led short courses on occupational safety for their coworkers. This outreach training relied less on lectures than on small group problem-solving activities. Both elements – the group problem-solving activities and the peer leadership – were meant to cultivate feelings of efficacy, preparing workers to take collective action for health and safety on the shopfloor.

The OCAW model caught the imagination of union and occupational health activists alike and spread rapidly through the loose community of trainers gathered around the NIEHS and Susan Harwood Grant programs (Deutsch, 1996). OCAW is now part of the United Steelworkers, and in its 2011 annual report, the union's Tony Mazzocchi Center reported training 26,173 members.

DOING IT OLD SCHOOL: PEER TRAINING IN THE BUILDING TRADES

The OCAW model has many attractive features, but is not the only union model of peer-led health and safety training. The construction industry unions offer an alternative.

The construction industry is really like no other in North America. Every union affiliated with the Building and Construction Trades Department (BCTD) of the AFL-CIO was established *before* Taylor wrote his 1911 treatise on scientific management. Many of the functions reserved to management in other industries fall instead to the labour organization in union sector construction. Workers seek employment by reporting to a union hiring hall rather than applying to a company, and they obtain their health and retirement benefits from their union rather than their employer.

Most importantly, the unions provide their vocational training through an apprenticeship system inherited from the medieval guilds. Workers learn their trade through a multi-year program of hands-on activities supervised closely by experienced peers. A contribution or tax assessed on employers indicated in the union contract – typically 50 cents or a dollar for every hour they employ a union tradesman or tradeswoman – finances this training. Employers share supervision of an apprenticeship trust fund, but as a practical matter the union administers the program. The very nature of the building industry dictates that construction firms must hire skilled workers in large numbers upon winning a contract and dismiss them upon completion. Union construction firms are thus party to a social contract with their respective labour organizations – they cede control of most personnel functions to the labour organization, and the union in turn guarantees the availability of a sufficient supply of skilled labour when needed.

The scale of union apprenticeship programs can astonish those outside the trades. In a 2013 interview with *Engineering News-Record* magazine, BCTD President Sean McGarvey estimated that the union apprenticeship programs spend nearly US\$1 billion annually. Reports submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor by just four of the fourteen major apprenticeable construction trades claimed over 100,000 active apprentices in 2011.² The effect of this network of institutions is to give labour in the building trades a degree of control over work practices unheard of in other sectors of the economy – as has been demonstrated by the rapid expansion of safety training for craft labour over the past decade.

HEADING OFF TAYLORISM IN OSHA OUTREACH TRAINING

Construction is one of the most dangerous sectors of the economy. On average, in the US, construction accidents claimed the lives of more than 1000 workers every year between 2003 and 2011. Firms in the sector pay a hefty

price for this in workers' compensation insurance premiums as well, and in the 1990s they increasingly looked to a small OSHA program to address the issue. At that time the OSHA Training Institute (OTI) operated a modest, voluntary train-the-trainer program focused on hazard awareness in construction. Outreach instructors trained at the OTI campus near Chicago, Illinois were authorized to teach two basic courses in construction hazard awareness, known as OSHA-10 and OSHA-30 for construction. The courses took ten hours and thirty hours respectively, and participants would receive a card indicating they had received the OSHA-authorized training.

With demand increasing, OSHA expanded the program by allowing certified nonprofit institutions like community colleges to become OSHA Training Institute Education Centers (OTIECs) eligible to "train the trainers." But much of the industry embraced the program from a distinctly Taylorist perspective. Their target audience was supervisors, not workers. Many companies adopted policies requiring the training for supervisory personnel – sometimes even administrative assistants and clerks who never left the corporate office! – but not workers themselves. One workers' compensation provider spoke for many of his colleagues when he shrugged off the necessity for training workers: "The supervisors are planning the work" (personal communication, January 11, 2013). If any worker training was necessary, supervisors could provide it on the job site.

The unions' role in industry governance, however, gave them the power to respond. Labour representatives cogently argued that workers often had the initiative on the jobsite, and that a peer-led train-the-trainer program based in the apprenticeship and training system was the best vehicle to deliver this training.

The BCTD, as the coordinating body for the building trades unions, established critical infrastructure for the effort. In 1994, CPWR – The Center for Construction Research and Training (CPWR) (the BCTD's affiliated safety and health institute) partnered with the National Labor College (US) and the extension program of West Virginia University to form the National Resource Center, an authorized OTIEC eligible to train the trainers and issue OSHA-10 and OSHA-30 cards. Meanwhile, union safety and health representatives from each of the affiliated trade unions, working with outside technical experts and soliciting input from construction employer associations, drafted a standard health and safety curriculum that both reflected worker concerns and met OSHA requirements.

The National Resource Center (NRC) then worked with the affiliated construction unions to recruit a team of 50 master trainers, trade workers of extensive experience and wide-ranging practical health and safety knowledge, representing every construction craft. These master trainers fanned out to local apprenticeship and training centres, teaching a corps of over 4,000 outreach

trainers how to administer OSHA-10 and OSHA-30 to their brothers and sisters in the local union.

The trade unions took two additional steps to help establish this safety training as a standard for craft labour in the commercial and industrial building sectors. First, in the course of the decade, virtually all of the construction trades amended their national apprenticeship standards to make OSHA-10 – and in some cases, OSHA-30 – a mandatory part of the apprenticeship curriculum. Today most union apprentices receive this training near the start of their vocational training.

Equally importantly, the unions launched a campaign calling on public agencies, in their role as construction owners, to mandate the OSHA-10 safety training for workers employed on public construction contracts. Many public construction contracts already contained clauses requiring bidders to meet wage and benefit standards, local hiring requirements, and goals for participation by women and underrepresented groups. Starting with Rhode Island in 2002, seven US states have mandated OSHA-10 training cards for workers on taxpayer-financed construction contracts – much to the chagrin of non-union “open shop” employers who have not matched the union investment in safety training, or indeed in training generally.

RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

The National Resource Center has issued over one million OSHA Outreach Cards since its 1994 inception. Not all were in construction, but most were: the building trades unions trained over 220,000 workers in OSHA-10 or OSHA-30 between 2010 and 2012. Before the National Resource Center was established fewer than 2% of industry workers received this training.

Depending on one’s assumptions about labour turnover, retirement, and the like, it seems likely that this training reaches at least a quarter of active workers, and that share is growing.

For those of us in the US occupational safety field, this record is astonishing. It’s difficult to find any comparable workplace safety initiative adopted so widely without a national OSHA regulation mandating its use – and finding such an example driven by labour is harder still. Yet many who take their orientation from the OCAW model find it difficult to conceive of these programs as “peer training” or labour activism in the sense to which they are accustomed.

This is understandable, for there are important distinctions between the OCAW model and the apprenticeship and training programs operated by the building trades. Many of the instructors who deliver OSHA-10 training have put down their tools for good to become full-time instructors. They learned their skills on the job rather than in university, but are they “peer trainers”?

Perhaps more significantly, the apprenticeship and training funds are supervised by a board of trustees on which a union and its signatory contractors are equally represented. Trade unionists typically take the lead in preparing curricula, operating training centres, and delivering instruction, but the funds function by mutual consent. They presuppose that employers and employees share certain, if limited, common goals, a notion many labour militants find difficult to accept.

This constitutes a definite limit on the scope of their activity: if workers want to press for changes employers resist, they must pursue them through the union itself, using traditional tools like strikes and collective bargaining, rather than through the joint training and apprenticeship apparatus. On the other hand, the apprenticeship committees have compensating strengths as well. Much peer-driven health and safety training in the United States is dependent on a handful of government grant programs; the vulnerability of these efforts in a time of austerity, budget deficits and a political leadership that ranges from lukewarm to hostile is self-evident. The funding of the building trades' apprenticeship and training apparatus is certainly endangered by long-term trends in union density, but is at least safe from the vagaries of the election cycle and congressional budget process.

More importantly, it might reasonably be said that shared governance of the training system is the price that unions must pay to play in a system that delegates to them vast power over personnel functions that in other industries is an employer monopoly. This partnership may not allow for exclusive union control over occupational safety training, but it allows the union the opportunity to influence norms across an entire industry in a way few other labour organizations can match. Only that scope enabled the building trades unions to create a new norm in health and safety for workers across the US construction industry.

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NOTES

1. For details and statistics on the Susan Harwood Grant Program see OSHA, <https://www.osha.gov/dte/sharwood/statistics.html>; for details on the NIEHS program see <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat/programs/awardees/index.cfm>
2. The United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, the Sheet Metal Workers, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and the Ironworkers reported a combined 106,503 apprentices in 2011 on their LM-2 reports submitted to the Department of Labor. Some unions do not report apprentices as a separate member category so a total number is not available.

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