

WORKSHOP ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY 29-30 AUGUST 2014, KOLKATA

A Two day workshop on Occupational Health and Safety was conducted on 29-30 August, 2014 at Kolkata. The workshop was organized with the help of “Workers Initiative”, a common platform of different independent Trade Unions and struggling workers of Kolkata along with representatives of Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), Occupational and Environmental Health Network of India (OEHNI) and Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims (ANROEV).



About 30 Union activists of the Trade Unions of the workers of Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd (GRSE) a leading warship building and Central Public Sector Enterprise (CPSE), Hindustan Unilever Ltd, Paharpur Cooling Towers Ltd, IMC Ltd and others participated in the training program. The training program was the first of its kind attended by the workers who were discussing about the problems of Health and Safety for the first time.

The training program was inaugurated by Comrade Chinmoy Jana, General Secretary, GRSE Workmen's Union and Com Kamal Tewary, President of "Workers Initiative". Mr. Tewary said that the Trade Unions are confined only within economic demands although it has a responsibility to address all the three fundamental issues of the workers namely the

1. economic demands
2. Issues relates to rights of the workers and
3. Facilities for workers equally,

He added that, unfortunately except the economic demands the other two issues have largely been ignored and or undermined by the TU's. He emphasized that it is not a criticism to any organization rather being a part of workers movement it is our self-criticism and therefore we have to address the issue of occupational health and safety in proper prospective, particularly during this second phase of capital globalization era when the big industrialist houses, corporate world and MNC's are looking for profit. He urged all participants to understand the gravity of the issue and chalk outan action plan to address the issue of occupational health and safety.



Participants being welcomed to the workshop

After discussing the needs for such a training program, Sanjiv Pandita and Omana George from AMRC, Hong Kong gave a brief background of AMRC and ANROEV network and introduced the work being on the issues of Health and Safety not only in India but other countries in Asia. They highlighted the problems in Health and safety and the lack of any data by the government agencies. They stressed on the capacity building of individual organisations and Unions on health and safety and stated its importance. “We work for monetary gains not to spoil our health. It is the duty of the employer to protect health of the workers”, said Sanjiv Pandita.

Sh Jagdish Patel, PTRC spoke in length about the role which Trade unions have played for the betterment of health and safety of the workers in different parts of the country. He narrated several examples where the unions were able to improve the conditions of the workplace and also help in getting compensation and also cases where due to lack of focus, situations in workplace could not improve, stressing the important point that the unions need to include the demand of health and safety as a priority and not as a luxury.



Omana George explaining Hazard Mapping

The workers and union members were introduced to the concept of Hazard Mapping in their work place. They were encouraged to map their workplaces and identify different types of hazards like physical hazards, chemical hazards among others. The workers divided into groups based on the workplaces and very enthusiastically mapped their workplaces and reported the hazards. It was also an eye opener for them as many workplace conditions which they had come to treat as granted were labelled as hazardous condition which can cause grave damage to their body. Some of the hazards reported were noise, working at heights, cramped spaces, fire hazards, non-availability of personal protective equipment etc.

Interestingly all the workers reported that they did not all have access to safe and clean drinking water. Considering the big industries these workers were from, denial of a basic necessity was shocking.



Workers Preparing and presenting Hazard Maps of their workplaces

The workers were then introduced in depth about some of the hazards like Chemical hazards, Noise hazards and ergonomics. These hazards had been identified as some of the hazards which were present in their workplaces and were impacting them the most. They were explained about how these hazards impacted their bodies, how the physical hazards can enter the body. The workers were explained about how each of the hazard effects their body and specifically what organ of the body through the body mapping exercise. The workers were encouraged to point out the body organs which they thought were being effected by the hazards they were facing every day. Examples ranged from ears effected due to high noise, liver and kidney being effected through various chemicals which were entering the body, eyes, nose etc. this exercise enabled the workers to understand in real terms the problems in their body and they could link it back to the hazards in their work place. They narrated instances of such things where they had thought that the problems were due to hygiene or their mistake but with the help of the training they now understood that the reasons were in fact due to unsafe working conditions.

They were also explained about how noise was measured and the logarithmic scale of measurement in decibels. They were told about the statutory and permissible limits of various hazardous substances in the workplace as per Indian Acts and Regulations. The workers were surprised to know about such limits and the requirements for measurements by the employers. They stated that they had never noticed such measurements being taken nor the results were ever disclosed. The workers were told about safety committees which were required as per the law with the requisite number of participation from the workers. They were told about the importance of such committees and the functions which they need to undertake for the health and safety of the workers.

Once the workers were well acclimatized with the hazards, they were informed about the principles of hazard removal. They were told that engineering controls were the first line of defense. In case engineering controls are not possible or not adequate, then they should be followed with other forms like administrative controls, substitution with less hazardous materials, elimination of hazards by moving the machines to another premises or removing the workers from near the hazardous machines. They were told that the personal protective equipment should be treated as a last line of defense and only in case all else fails that these should be relied upon. Even after PPE is provided, it is essential that it is of good quality, and is regularly maintained / replaced. It was again stressed that even

with a PPE, the hazard is still present and someone without the PPE might be exposed to it so it is always a priority to remove the hazard from the workplace

Officials of Chief Inspector of Factories, Govt. of West Bengal namely Dr Sikdar and Mr Dipankar Sircar were also present in the training for a brief period and explained the position of the government of West Bengal towards health and safety of the workers. They were surprised by the stories of hazards in the reputed companies' premises which according to them, they had regularly monitored and did not find anything amiss. They promised to look into these matters urgently and also discuss with the management of these companies.

The workers were also asked to prepare an action plan based on the learnings from the workshop. They were again divided into groups based on their workplaces and told to list out their short term and long term plans. All the workers present listed out the steps also taking into consideration the hazard mapping which they had performed the previous day. They said that they will be discussing with the other union officials and the management to help in resolution of the hazards. The first and foremost for the workers was the availability of clean and safe drinking water for all workers.

Relevant to say here that such a training program was being organized for the first time for these workers, but the participants participated in the training warmly and spontaneously. After completion of training program it was witnessed that almost all the participant were very enthusiastic and stated that they will play an active role in the matter of OHS along with other TU activity. Lastly a five member Team was elected amongst the participants which will work-out the future program and explore ways and means to take-up the matter at the ground level and carry forward the agenda of OSH. Names of team members who were elected to the safety committee

1. Murari Mohan Burman , FOJ – GRSE
2. Amit Chakraborty , Main – GRSE
3. Sister Mithu Naskar , Main – GRSE
4. Ramesh Das IMC – KOLKATA
5. Srinivas Rao PCT – KOLKATA



Members of the Workers Safety Committee

The training ended with a vow by all present that they will help in improving the health and safety of the workers in their respective workplaces.



Participants in the Workshop