

81-7.232

American Factories are Death-Traps

by STEVE WAGNER

published by
New England Free Press
791 Tremont Street
Boston, Mass. 02118

According to the National Safety Council, the average annual on-the-job accident figures are: **14,300 deaths and 2.2 million non-fatal injuries.**

There is a side to American industry that only victims see. The mass media never mentions it, but it's there. That side is full of death and destruction.

Until I was injured in 1969 the term "industrial injury" was one that I found hard to relate to. When I hired on at Todd Shipyards in August of 1969 I had no idea that within a month I'd not only experience it first-hand but would learn more about it than I wanted to believe.

I hired on at Todd's as a Burner. My job was to cut steel with an automatic burning-torch. It seemed relatively easy—I was in the shop and the job consisted mostly of watching a machine cut huge slabs of steel. All I had to do was set the machine, light the torch, and make sure it stayed on the line to be cut. The pay was \$4.18 an hour, and it seemed like a job I would stay with for awhile. Other workers mentioned incidents where Burners had been working in a small compartment on a ship and had been burned to death, but that seemed very unreal to me. The steel shop was just across from the first-aid building, but I never paid any attention to the steady stream of workers going in and out of there. Besides, my bosses assured me that most workers who reported to first-aid were just trying to avoid work. Even the occasional ambulance didn't attract my attention.

I plodded along in this unconscious state for five weeks, and then one day I learned first-hand just what the first-aid building was all about.

September 8th of 1969 is just an obscure day in the past to most. But to me it's the day that the horrors of capitalism began to be all too real. September 8th started like any other work day. It was a Monday, so getting up at five and starting for work wasn't too pleasant. Work started at seven, and the first four hours went fast. We were caught up on most of the work, so there really wasn't much to do. My leadman got me started on cutting wedges out of extremely thick steel and I was just getting the hang of it by the time lunch rolled around. After lunch I started cutting wedges again, and then it happened. Hot steel sprayed on my pants leg and I was burning.

There was no water or fire-extinguishers handy, so I beat at the flame with my hard-hat. That didn't help a bit. My leadman saw what was happening and threw his coat around my leg. He was afraid of burning his coat, though, so he took it off too soon and I started burning again. He threw the coat back around me, and I wouldn't let him take it off again until I was sure the fire was out. He took the matter lightly and told me to move over to the other side of the shop and get started on something else. I looked at him like he was crazy and he asked if I hurt. I did, so he told me to go on over to first-aid and have them put something on it to stop the pain. But first I had to wait for him to fill out a form so that first-aid would look at my burn.

Three minutes later he was over at first-aid to see why I was taking so long. The nurse had me run cold water over the burn, spray some gunk on it, wrap a bandage around it, and return to work. All within ten minutes. For the rest of that week I continued working, and the nurse would change the bandage once a day and spray some gunk on it. Every time I lit the torch I could imagine the smell of burning flesh, but first-aid didn't seem to think it was a bad burn; even the Todd doctor looked at it, and he didn't think it was too bad. The gunk they sprayed on it kept it from hurting, so I didn't think it was bad, either.

That Friday the leadman and I were cutting an especially difficult piece of steel, and we were concentrating real hard on keeping it within 1/16th of an inch from specifications. In fact I was concentrating so hard that I hardly noticed when the leadman stepped back from the area so the scrap steel wouldn't fall on his foot. I didn't even pay any attention to the scrap steel until it fell on my foot. Then I was back at first-aid for the second injury that week.

This time they got real excited and sent me to a doctor. A third-degree burn didn't even phase 'em, but a simple toe injury brought all kinds of response. They stuck me in a cab and sent me to a doctor out by Greenlake. He messed around a little with my foot, told me it was nothing to worry about, then asked why I was still working with such a bad burn. He told me not to go to work the next Monday, and see him again the next Thursday. That was to become an oft-repeated incident, because the one-day off work soon dragged into a week off work, then a month, and finally six weeks later the good doctor decided the burn was not just a bad burn but a very bad burn. In the meantime it had become infected and I had trouble walking; when I could walk at all. So he sent me to a skin specialist who decided that what I really needed was some skin grafts. I spent three days in the hospital while they hacked skin off my good leg and tried to patch up the burns. That was the most educational three days I've ever spent. I was in a special industrial-injury ward, and the stories I heard there confirmed every suspicion I'd ever had of just what capitalism is all about.

About a month later I returned to work, much wiser for the experi-

ence but still happy to be back on the job and making a little money again. Within twenty-four hours I was not only out of work but no longer eligible for workmen's compensation because the doctor had signed a back-to-work slip for me. That's when I started to get really mad— First these fiends had burned me, then they'd hacked new scars onto my good leg to try to patch up the one they'd mutilated, and now they were telling me I couldn't work there any more.

I stormed out of there and bee-lined it right down to my union hall. They hadn't really been any help when I was injured, but I thought maybe they could do something about this new outrage. While I was bed-ridden with my injury I'd read a book called **Revolution in Seattle** that mentioned my union (Boilmakers Local 104) was the strongest in the state. So I had naive illusions about going to them and getting my job back.

I told the guy at the union hall what had happened, and he just looked at me like I was awful stupid. I elaborated a little further, thinking he just didn't understand. Then he told me flat out that he wasn't going to stick his neck out for me — that **of course** Todd's had fired me. That Todd's fired people who had been injured as soon as they got back to work. He put it like this: "If they didn't fire you you'd be telling the other workers what had happened to you and they might start paying more attention to their own personal safety than to getting the job done quickly".

That's how I began to understand just what capitalism is all about. All kinds of contradictions began to make themselves evident, and I began to realize that big unions aren't just working hand-in-glove with big business; they **are** big business. Just like in the old gangster movies— You either pay your protection money or your milk-cans get all shot up. With the union you either pay your dues or they have you fired. And if you get fired without any help on their part, they'll add insult to injury by telling you things that even the industrialists won't come right out and say.

Todd's and their union stand-ins get away with it because too many of us still fall for competing for **things**, like I did; \$4.18 an hour. Health and Welfare (so called), false sense of security. No more! The only way to go is to quit worrying about more things and gimmicks and learn how to get together and live like people.

originally published by
the communications company
box 734, seattle, oregon 98111

