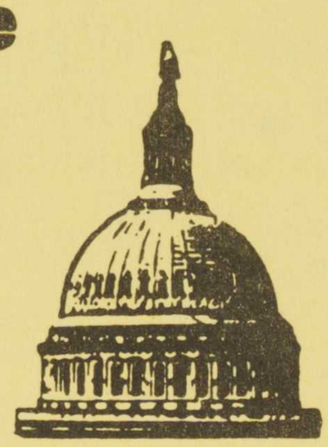
AFL-CIO Legislative
FACT SHEET



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OSHA REFORM

INTRODUCTION

Since the Occupational Safety and Health Act became law in 1970, much progress has been made and American workers are better protected. But every year 10,000 American workers die from job-related injuries. Tens of thousands of other working men and women a year die from diseases contracted because of exposure to chemicals and toxins in the workplace. Each year another 390,000 are diagnosed with occupational diseases. In 1991, more than 1.7 million workers were seriously injured on the job. Preventable tragedies like the fire at the Imperial Foods chicken plant in Hamlet, NC, and the building collapse at L'Ambiance Plaza in Bridgeport, CT, continue to occur.

These grim and deadly statistics show that it is time for Congress to act again. That is why the AFL-CIO is strongly supporting the Comprehensive Occupational Safety and Health Reform Act (H.R. 1280 and S. 575). H.R. 1280 was introduced by Representatives William Ford (D-MI) and Austin Murphy (D-PA) and S. 575 by Senators Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH). The almost identical bills will make many long-needed improvements to the OSHAct. The legislation also has special provisions which apply to the unique hazards in the construction industry. A separate bill, H.R. 115 introduced by Rep. William Clay (D-MO), would provide OSHA protection for federal and postal workers.

BACKGROUND

More than two decades ago the AFL-CIO and its allies were able to persuade Congress to act decisively to curtail the carnage in the American workplace. The result was the passage of the first comprehensive, nationwide program to prevent workplace deaths, injuries and illnesses. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 set a precedent: American working men and women have a right to a safe workplace and if employers refuse to provide that safe workplace, the federal government has an obligation and duty to protect workers.

While there is no doubt the 1970 Act has prevented many deaths and injuries and given workers legal protection they did not have before, much more needs to be done. The rates of workplace death and injury remain shockingly high. As a matter of fact, those rates have been climbing since 1983 and much of those increases are directly related to the cutbacks in funds and inspection personnel under the Reagan and Bush administrations. In addition, during those years OSHA was lax in enforcing many of the regulations already on the books.

Along with the tragic cost in human lives, workplace deaths, injuries and illnesses have a huge financial cost. These work-related injuries cost more than $83 billion. The price tag includes $31 billion in medical and other direct costs and $53 billion in lost work time. These costs have direct impacts in the nation's health care crisis and the nation's competitiveness battle against companies abroad.

There are also serious weaknesses in the current law which must be corrected. For example, current law does not require an employer to correct the most serious health and safety violations if the citation is contested. That means deadly and unsafe practices can continue for months and even years.