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Steel-plant accident: Safety goggles and hard-toe shoes aren't enough

A Matter of Life and Death

These reminders are everywhere: small signs on grinding machines warning operators to wear protective goggles; big signs on plant walls cautioning "Don't Gamble With Safety." And somehow, the signs themselves convey the reassuring assumption that working in American industry is safe and probably getting safer. The National Safety Council itself asserts that Americans are safer at work than in their homes. But in truth, the signs might well read "Warning: Working May Be Hazardous to Your Health." Materials and processes are becoming more complex and dangerous; safety tends to take second place to speed of production; a lethal blend of carelessness and complacency results in 2 million injuries and 14,000 deaths every year from industrial accidents. Or, as former Secretary of Labor George Shultz starkly puts it: "During the past four years more Americans have been killed where they work than in Vietnam."

Almost surely, Shultz understates the case. The government's own statistics show that the rate of industrial accidents soared by 23 per cent between 1935 and 1967, the latest year for which figures have been compiled. But since only sixteen states cooperate with the Federal government in keeping records, the Labor Department's figures are based on questionnaires filled out by employers themselves. And not all the businessmen, complain such critics as president I.W. Abel of the United Steelworkers union, make honest reports. "If a fellow breaks his leg," Abel charges, "the company will bring him to work in a taxi, give him a soft job, really just let him sit around, and not report the accident." Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, who is preparing a book on industrial safety, charges that some companies go to extreme lengths to suppress sloppy safety records. A large beryllium producer, Nader says, once warned a company doctor that he would be looking for another job if he published a report on beryllium poisoning among employees of the plant.

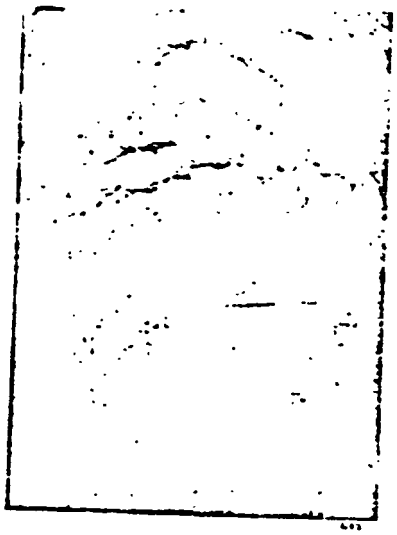
All told, an AFL-CIO safety committee estimated last week, the official statistics tell only half the story; the true accident rate comes to 4 million disabling injuries a year. And even this figure may be low. Some of the worst, in fact, is private research firm working for the Labor Department estimates that no fewer than 25 million workers are injured every year—twelve times the official figure—and 500,000 more are disabled by occupational diseases.

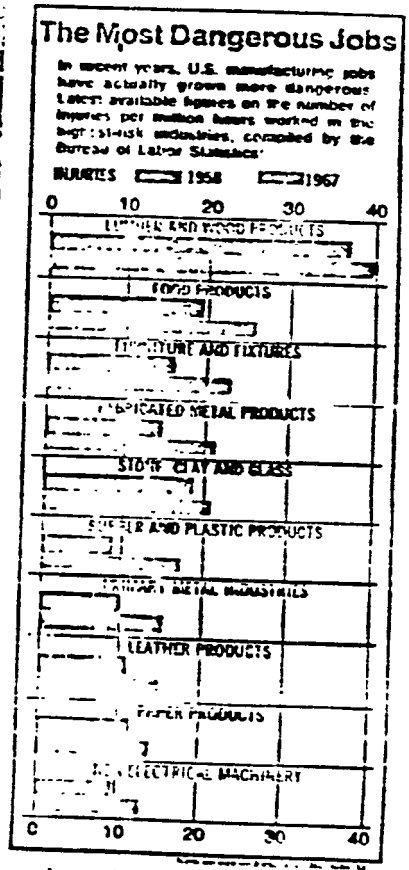
Good Earth: Accident rates are highest for jobs involved with wresting resources from the earth. Mining, quarrying, logging and oil-well drilling all exact a heavy toll. Whatever the industry, the most common single killer is the motor vehicle, from the farm tractor to the fork-lift truck in the factory. But the greatest number of job accidents result from falls and falling objects, such as the huge, 430-foot-long pipe at U.S. Steel Corp.'s Gary works that clogged up with sludge and crashed last winter, killing three men and injuring five.

Apart from outright accidents, no one knows for sure how many workers have been struck down by silent killers in the form of carcinogenic chemicals, noxious fumes and debilitating dust particles that have become commonplace ingredients of the manufacturing process. Because of the high costs of installing safety equipment, small companies with old plants cause a disproportionate share of the disabilities. In Muskegon, Mich., for example, the Lakey Foundry Co. has only 1,000 employees, but more than 350 suits demanding compensation for injuries have been filed against the company. The problem: a thick carpet of silica dust



The perils of coal. Fire and disease make the worst record





from the sand used in the casting process. Inhaled over a long period of time, the fine particles cause silicosis, a condition that transforms men into cripples racked by paroxysms of coughing.

The foundry's air was tested in 1915 and found to contain ten times the recommended safe level of dust. Twenty years later the limits had been cut in half, but the air was about as dirty as ever. Lakey president Guy F. Campbell [illegible] the other plants we have as a problem," but Muskegon lawyer Jerry S. McCroskey has another—and more indignant—explanation. Because the maximum liability of a Michigan foundry in the case of silicosis is only $12,500, plus medical and funeral expenses, McCroskey says, "it has been so inexpensive to disable or kill a man . . . that it has not been worthwhile to clean up."

Silicosis is just one of many crippling and deadly respiratory diseases common to industry. In the insulating trade, estimates Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, 8 per cent of all the workers will die from asbestosis caused by breathing tiny particles of asbestos. The disease was identified in 1924; yet when New York City passed safety standards last spring for the spraying of asbestos, it was the first city in the U.S. to do so.

Venal? And the indifference to health is widespread. More than 100,000 of the nation's 1 million textile-mill workers have contracted byssinosis, or brown-lung disease, from inhaling cotton dust, according to estimates made by New Jersey's Sen. Harrison Williams. Yet an article in the American Textile Reporter, a widely read trade publication, dismisses the disease as "a thing thought up by venal doctors who attended last year's ILO meeting in Africa, where inferior races are found to be afflicted by new diseases more superior people defeated years ago."

Nowhere has the disregard for safety been more flagrant than in the mining of coal, which has been the most dangerous occupation in the U.S. for years. In fact, coal mines have claimed the staggering toll of 60,000 lives since the Bureau of Mines began keeping records in 1910. But even so, Congress did not get around to enacting the first mine-safety law until 1911.

Hobbles: It was not until 1968 and the explosion of Consolidation Coal's mine at Farmington, W.Va., killing 78 men that Congress was prodded into passing a more comprehensive Mine Safety Act. With the added disclosure that thousands of miners had been sent to early graves by pneumoconiosis, or black-lung disease, the new act set the first limits on the level of coal dust permitted in underground chambers. But effective enforcement of the 1969 standards has been hobbled by the failure of the Nixon Administration to appoint a new Director of Mines to replace Democrat John F. O'Leary. Although appropriations for the Bureau of Mines were quadrupled last year to $13 million to hire more mine inspectors, Nader charged last week that the agency was actually conducting only one-eighteenth as many inspections as it did last year.

The generally unimpressive industrial-safety record in the U.S. has a good many causes, none of them reflecting much credit on those responsible. Union leaders too often are willing to barter safety for a wage hike. Employers tend to try to coax a little more life from worn-out and unsafe machinery. State safety standards are too often antiquated and ineffective, and there aren't enough inspectors to enforce the ones on the books. Indeed, four states have no safety inspectors at all, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that of the 1,524 state inspectors in the entire country, only 527 are available for general safety inspection—a third of the number of fish and game wardens in the U.S.

While the record is certainly better than it was 50 years ago, it is clearly not good enough. Nor is it up to the standard of many European countries, where job safety is a matter of national policy. A British factory worker is only one-third as likely to be disabled as his U.S. counterpart. Only one out of every 12,000 Swedish workers is killed at work [illegible] than half the U.S. rate—and the Swedish accident rate has not gone up since 1955.

Net Gain: By careful planning, a few U.S. companies have set enviable records. Through a total approach to safety, one du Pont chemical factory operated for 45 million man-hours without a single disabling injury. A Houston construction firm spent $90,000 struggling a safety net around the base of a 50-story office building and found the investment paid off in faster production.

[illegible] safety problems are moving beyond the plant gates. Indeed, the impetus for stiffer standards has been measurably increased by a wave of industrial accidents that threaten the public at large as well as the workers involved. Routinely, deadly phosgene gas is slapped about the country for processing into plastics. Fumes of the common fertilizer, anhydrous ammonia, are lethal, as shown by the death of eight

residents of Crete, Neb., when two tank cars carrying the stuff were derailed there last year. Because so many of these hazards involve transportation—and because railroad accidents increased by an alarming 60 per cent between 1963 and 1968—pressure lately has focused on improving the standards of the nation's crumbling rail network. Last week, the House approved and sent to conference committee a bill giving the Department of Transportation broad powers to set new standards for the shipment of hazardous cargoes.

No Hiding Place: But Congress has yet to come to grips with a stringent, effective national industrial safety act. The time may be at hand; at long last, workmen themselves are beginning to clamor for protection. Says an official of the United Auto Workers: "The men have abandoned the falling-object syndrome that used to assume a guy could protect himself. Now they see there are a lot of environmental situations that can't be handled by safety goggles and hard-toe shoes. And they are up in arms."

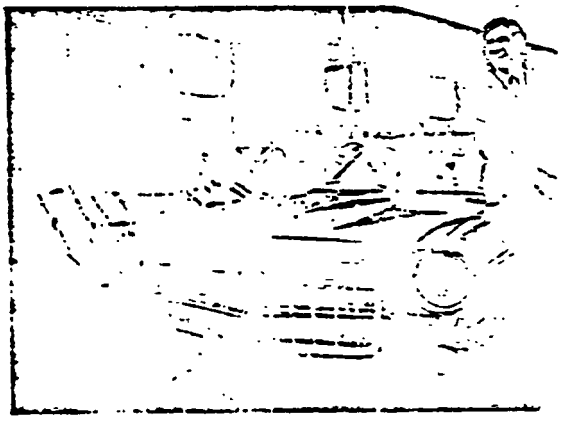
[illegible] the Nixon Administration has sent up a bill that would delegate the power to establish and enforce new safety regulations to a five-man Presidential panel. But Congress is divided between this measure and a House bill that would give the Secretary of Labor the direct authority to order companies to eliminate unsafe job practices. Organized labor and the vocal reformers, including Nader, support the House version, while the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers back the Administration. Because of this impasse, the prospect for passage of either bill is rated slim. But any extended deadlock seems sure to ignite protest among reformers, who see the delay as a plain matter of life and death. "In a nation deeply concerned with human and economic progress," says George Shultz, "such backsliding is a matter for distress."

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Chevrolet's DeLorean and the Vega 2300: A Beet

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