Health and Safety Committees That Work

All employers are required by law to establish and maintain a safe and healthy work environment. This is true in the depots, yards and other facilities, and on the roads and rails.

Making the workplace safe is the responsibility of the employer. But as transit workers you know best the hazards you face. Your knowledge is needed to find the best solutions and make sure they are carried out.

Many collective bargaining agreements include language that also describes the employer’s obligations and the union’s and members’ roles.

Health and safety committees are among the most important tools available to transit workers, and to employers. The Union health and safety committee is where unions bring together their members, their international union resources and other partners to set targets and develop plans for change. In joint committees, health and safety concerns are evaluated, tracked and addressed in a way that all parties can agree upon. But these committees only work when you know what you want from them. They must be set up and run in a way that supports effective workplace improvement. In this process the local union gains strength among its members and in relation to the employer.

This booklet, developed by the National Labor College, forms the basis of ATU’s training module *Running Powerful Health and Safety Committees*. Use it to build your union and win a safer and healthier workplace.

In solidarity,

[Signature]

Lawrence J. Hanley
International President
Amalgamated Transit Union
Workers face many health and safety problems on the job. For example, there are toxic chemicals in workplaces, poor air quality, and machines that do not have safety guards. There are also problems around how work is organized. This can include not having enough people to do the work, long hours of work, and stress. Safety and health problems are called “hazards.”

A health and safety committee can help improve conditions on the job. An effective committee can get hazards corrected. It can also encourage union members to work together to make sure the workplace is safe.

There are two types of health and safety committees:

- Local union health and safety committees, made up of union members.
- Joint labor-management health and safety committees, made up of representatives from union and management.

Both kinds of committees are important in improving workplace health and safety.
What does a local union health and safety committee do?

**Identify, evaluate and suggest solutions for safety and health hazards:**
- Do regular workplace inspections to identify hazards.
- Review information about injuries and accidents to find out what is hurting workers.
- Do a questionnaire that workers fill out to tell the committee about safety and health problems.
- Do body mapping and hazard mapping with workers.
- Decide which hazards need to be fixed right away.
- Suggest ways management can improve safety and health at the workplace.

**Provide information and education:**
- Train workers on how to identify and report unsafe conditions.
- Keep union members and leaders informed.
- Make sure there is a way for union members to communicate their concerns to the committee.
- Make sure management does not do anything to discourage workers from reporting injuries and illnesses.

**Investigate accidents and injuries:**
- Develop ways to report accidents, injuries and illnesses right away.
- Ask questions about what caused the problem and how it can be fixed.

**Take action:**
- Shut down an unsafe job until the hazard is fixed.
- Make sure management fixes health and safety problems.
- Check out workplace changes made by management to make sure the changes do not create more health and safety problems.
- File and follow-up on OSHA complaints.
- Prepare for joint labor-management health and safety committee meetings.
What do local union committee members need to be effective?

To make sure that a union health and safety committee is effective, committee members need the following:

Paid time for activities:
- Union health and safety committee members should be paid for the time they spend on committee activities.
- Sometimes the union contract can give committee members the right to do committee work on employer-paid time.

Access to the workplace:
- Union health and safety committee members need to be able to go to all parts of the workplace. This allows them to speak with workers about health and safety concerns and to investigate accidents or injuries.

Resources:
- A basic library and Internet access can help members learn more about health and safety laws and hazards.
- A resource list of unions, labor education programs at colleges and universities, and COSH groups (Committees on Occupational Safety and Health) can help the committee get ideas about how to solve health and safety problems.

Training:
- Union health and safety committee members need to get training about health and safety and about how to take action.
- Local unions can arrange this training through the international union, labor education programs at a university, or COSH groups.
A joint health and safety committee gives the union a chance to talk with management about health and safety problems and to suggest how problems should be fixed.

What does a joint labor-management health and safety committee do?

A joint labor-management health and safety committee does many of the same things as the local union committee. The difference is that the union is doing these activities with management. The union’s job in the joint committee is make sure management listens to workers’ concerns and fixes health and safety problems.

Some of the activities that joint labor-management health and safety committees can do include:

- Review all health and safety information. This includes OSHA 300 injury and illness reports, complaints that have been filed, and results of workplace inspections.

- Investigate workplace accidents or “near misses” and any illnesses.

- Discuss ideas for changes that eliminate or help reduce hazards.

- Find out if health and safety changes have eliminated the problem.
How effective is your joint labor-management committee?

The following ten questions will help workers and unions think about how effective your joint committee is.

See how many “yes” answers you check.

QUESTIONS

1. Does the union bring its own “agenda” (what it wants) to the committee and does the committee work on the union’s issues?

2. Do union and management have equal numbers of members on the committee?

3. Does the union get to pick their members on the committee?

4. Do union committee members regularly meet separately from management to discuss union concerns and to plan for the joint meetings?

5. Do union and management share responsibility for setting meeting agendas and goals, chairing meetings, and taking action on specific issues?

6. Are union committee members paid their regular wages for meetings, inspections, and other committee activities?

7. Can the committee make decisions and put them into effect?

8. Can the committee make inspections of the workplace and shut down unsafe jobs?

9. Does the committee have access to health and safety information kept by the employer (for example, injury and illness reports, test results of noise levels, list of chemical hazards at the workplace)?

10. Does the local union regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the committee?

ANSWERS

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no

☐ yes ☐ no
Review your answers.

Review your answers. If you only have a few “yes” boxes marked, your joint committee is probably not very effective in getting health and safety problems fixed. The union members of the committee need to talk to one another about what changes are needed to make your joint committee more effective. They also need to talk to management about what changes are needed. The union may decide to not participate in the joint committee if it is not effective.

These are the KEY points:

Health and safety committees can be either local union committees or joint labor-management committees.

These committees can help identify and solve health and safety issues and hazards on the job.

Make sure your joint labor-management committee is really effective in correcting health and safety hazards.
Health and Safety Resources and Training

ATU produces a wide array of training modules and materials on issues affecting the health and safety of transit workers. These also cover the skills that will lead to effective action. Here are few of the training topics that can be used by local unions for their members and leadership.

To request materials and schedule training, contact:
Amalgamated Transit Union
Office of the President
5025 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20016-4139
202-537-1645

**PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST BUS OPERATORS**

A FACTSHEET FOR LOCAL UNIONS

ATU and TWU are working together to stop the epidemic of workplace violence against transit workers in the U.S. and Canada. Workplace violence robs any physical assault, threatening behavior, or verbal abuse that occurs in the course of any work-related duty.

Bus operators in particular are frequently the targets of violent physical assault. An estimated 40% of Canadian drivers are attacked while on duty during the course of their career. New York City bus drivers were assaulted 200 times in 2006 and assaults are up 30% since then. A 2012 ATU/TWU survey found that 1/3 of the 94 responding locals reported operator assaults to be an increasing issue.

ATU and TWU have formed a joint committee to:
- Educate and involve union members about workplace violence and its causes and prevention,
- Provide support to local unions with collective bargaining, training, and other strategies,
- Meet with government agencies such as OSHA and NIOSH, and
- Reach out to the public, the media, and elected officials to make our concerns known.

**Stop the Campaign**

RISK FACTORS THAT CAN LEAD TO VIOLENCE

A risk factor is any condition that increases the likelihood that harm will occur. Bus operators face most of the known risk factors for workplace violence, including:

- Conducting surveys to find out how operations are affected and what Local Unions are doing to protect their members,
- Meeting with government agencies such as OSHA, and
- Reaching out to the public, the media, and elected officials to tell our story and get support.

**RESTROOM ACCESS**

A FACTSHEET FOR LOCAL UNIONS

ATU and TWU are working together to win restroom access for transit workers across the US and Canada. Transit workers use bathrooms every day, and access or lack thereof can be a stressor, leading to a range of health impacts.

The vehicle maintenance work environment can be dirty, noisy and dangerous. The tools, equipment, materials and work schedules demand planning, care and attention to stay safe and healthy. Risks range from skin irritation to chronic diseases and even fatal injury. These are all university conditions that can be improved.

Injuries from trips and slips are the most frequently reported problems, followed by cuts and lacerations from sharp objects. These are caused by working conditions and by exposure to bloodborne pathogens on the job.

Railroad workers face a number of additional concerns during their work, including working to protect their members,

- Provide support to local unions with collective bargaining, training, and other strategies,
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**The Problem**

Restrooms are critical for transit workers, who spend long hours on the job and have accessibility needs. Many restrooms fail to meet accessibility requirements, leading to physical and psychological challenges. Workers may also experience discrimination, harassment, and violence in the workplace.

**Solutions**

- Educate and involve union members about workplace violence and its causes and prevention.
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**Health and Safety in Transit**

VEHICLE MAINTENANCE

A FACTSHEET FOR LOCAL UNIONS

Bus operators work can be unhealthy and even dangerous. Transit workers have among the highest rates of all US workers for high blood pressure, chronic lung and back problems and depression. Work conditions that lead to these problems include (among many others) schedule stress, air quality, passenger abuses, vehicle seat and control that do not fit the operator, fatigue, widespread disorder and demanding access to food and exposure to infectious diseases. Workers conditions can be improved, and some hazards could be eliminated. One step is more training.

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