

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY ISSUES

DUPONT SAFETY SYSTEM

A number of corporations have contracted with DuPont Safety and Environmental Management Services to provide a safety system for them. DuPont is the chemical company which coined the phrase “better living through chemistry”. While many of the chemicals produced by DuPont have made living easier for us in the 20th Century, many also have harmed the health of workers who have produced them and harmed the environment. It is ironic that it is the same corporation that today sells safety systems.

Like the 5 Star system, the DuPont system rests on the premise that safety is a management function. It sees safety as a set of management practices making rules set for workers with which they should comply.

Since the DuPont system is from the United States, the Canadian concepts of worker health and safety rights:

- **to participate** in joint worker-management health and safety committees
- **to refuse** hazardous work
- **to know** about workplace hazards

are not mentioned.

In the US *Occupational Health and Safety Act* there is no requirement for joint committees or the right to refuse though there is a requirement that employers inform workers of hazards. When DuPont mentions safety committees, they are referring to exclusively management committees with no worker participation.

In the DuPont system there is no mention of the requirement for the employer to comply with health and safety statutes and regulations. They even ignore such important specific requirements as safe lockout procedures, machine guarding or good ventilation.

As well there is no mention of unions or of collective agreements, many of which contain health and safety language. Our existence and our collective rights are completely ignored. This may not be surprising since there is so little unionization in the United States but it is completely unacceptable in Canada where our unionization rate is 36% and where we have played a strong and important role in advocating safer and healthier workplaces.

DuPont system emphasizes safety problems and almost completely ignores health problems. This is because the costly DuPont system is sold to companies by emphasizing the goal of health and safety cost reduction. There are fast payoffs to companies in reducing injuries. Occupational diseases, however, may take years to appear, with workers’ compensation disease claims rarely successful. Since there is little cost to disease claims, companies have little financial interest in preventing ill health. DuPont therefore ignores the issue. Since it began as a chemical company, it is unfortunate the DuPont system does not emphasize chemical hazards.

DuPont sees workers as passive objects. One DuPont report explained worker commitment to improving safety by emphasizing “They respond well to direction”. In other words if management tells workers to “be safe” they will. This concept is fundamentally wrong. It assumes that workers are stupid and do not have enough sense to avoid accidents. It assumes the workers carelessness and workers ignoring management safety rules are the root causes of accidents. The reality is that it is workers who are at risk of harm in the workplace, not management. Workers are sensible people, not fools. Workers will avoid harm if given the opportunity.

DUPONT SYSTEM BLAMES THE VICTIMS

DuPont claims “Studies have shown that more than 90 percent of all injuries and incidents are the result of unsafe acts”. This is untrue. It is a negative “blame the victim” approach. It ignores the fundamental design problems in the workplace, work station, work tools and work organization that are responsible for most accidents. As well it ignores the issue of the pressures for production that persuade workers to take changes. Rather than reduce the pace of production, workers are blamed if they get hurt.

It is ironic that while the DuPont system claims worker error is the root of 90 percent of accidents, they do not mention the need for worker education and training in the health and safety area. Instead, they say that supervisors should “enforce the rules”

The DuPont system may be accompanied by a safety award program. Safety award programs assume that injured workers are responsible for their own misfortune; if they were more careful, they would not hurt themselves. These programs provide an incentive for workers not to report accidents, especially lost time accidents. When injury statistics are hidden, employers’ workers’ compensation costs are reduced.

When management attempts to introduce a DuPont system, most CAW locals and health and safety activists have resisted it. Instead, they call upon the company to listen to the worker side of the joint health and safety committee and implement their recommendations. They say the company should spend much needed dollars for health and safety improvements rather than on expensive advice to management from DuPont.

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