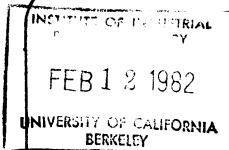


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REAGAN CRACKS DOWN ON OSHA

by Jamie Robinson

During his first weeks in office President Reagan dealt a series of hard blows to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's program to reduce health and safety hazards on the job. Prominent victims of the President's attack were union-supported regulations designed to increase the participation of workers in controlling job dangers.

Reagan's newly appointed Secretary of Labor Raymond Donovan suspended OSHA regulations that would have required firms to identify hazardous chemicals used on the job, and to pay employees for time spent accompanying OSHA officials on inspections of the workplace. The Secretary of Labor also took actions to impede and possibly kill OSHA's proposed new standards on noise and cancer-causing chemicals.

Unions and environmental groups have formed a coalition to fight against these and other attacks against workplace and environmental laws. The new OSHA and Environment Network, which includes the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, will operate initially in a dozen states, including California, to mobilize labor and environmental activists towards lobbying campaigns directed at federal legislators.

The Broader Assault on OSHA

The recent suspensions of OSHA regulations are only the first salvo in what has been billed as a major attack on OSHA by the new Republican administration. Reagan's business advisors have picked out OSHA as one of their most detested federal agencies, and want to reorient it to emphasize cooperation rather than confrontation with industry.

Although earlier Republican statements had favored either an outright abolition of OSHA or a major revision of the original 1970 Act, it now appears that the crackdown will come via administrative changes in the operation of the agency. Murray Weidenbaum, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) proposed a one year moratorium on all regulations, regardless of urgency, to give industry a "breathing spell."

Senator Dan Quayle, a newly elected member of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee which oversees OSHA, said that a major intent of the new Republican campaign will be to shift the burden of proof from industry, which currently has to show its workplaces are safe, to labor and OSHA, which will have to prove that they are unsafe. In his talk, sponsored by the Formaldehyde Institute in Washington, D.C., Quayle said the result of this "dramatic shift" is likely to be "much slower" rulemaking to protect workers.

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Unions Support Regulations

The suspended regulations had the strong support of the AFL-CIO, and the attack on OSHA is generally seen as part of a larger anti-union mood in the new administration.

The walkaround pay rule would have provided stewards and members a chance to obtain an overview of the hazards throughout their workplaces. Until this regulation was proposed, firms were only required to allow individual workers at particular work stations to talk with the OSHA inspector, but were not required to allow workers to accompany the inspector on the complete tour of the plant. Glen Watts, president of the Communications Workers of America, said his office has received "much communication" from CWA members concerning the refusal of employers to pay walkaround compensation, and noted that this behavior "has a chilling effect on CWA members' participation" in inspections.

The chemical hazards labelling regulation would have allowed workers to find out the dangers of the materials they use and thus to demand protective measures, rather than waiting for medical symptoms of disease to appear. George Taylor, director of health and safety at the AFL-CIO, said that the labor federation supported the regulation even though it was a compromise that covered only manufacturing industries. OSHA estimates that 8.9 million workers were exposed to potential chemical hazards in 1980.

General support for the policies adopted by OSHA during the Carter years was voiced by AFL-CIO Legislative Director Ray Denison. For the first time, Denison said, workers and unions were consulted on the administration and enforcement of the law.

Under Reagan, OSHA will be run by business executives with limited sympathy for the perspectives held by the Carter appointees. Secretary of Labor Donovan worked as an executive for a construction company that has been inspected by OSHA 49 times in the past seven years. As a result, OSHA proposed 57 serious citations and one repeated citation for violation of federal health and safety laws.

Dr. Eula Bingham will be replaced as head of OSHA by construction contractor Thorne Auchter. Mark deBernardo, an attorney for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said that Auchter is a "strong man with good administrative skills and business ties" and has a "philosophical attitude compatible with that of the Chamber."

- Jamie Robinson

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