

PREFACE

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY EPIDEMICS AND GLOBAL CHANGE—REVEALING THE NEW FORMS OF RISK AT WORK AND THE DANGER OF IGNORING THEM

Work has always entailed health risks. “Through work, man transforms nature but also himself” (Karl Marx). As with other animals, prehistoric women and men faced risks of accidents and bodily wear and tear in their toil for food and shelter. As they started to master natural resources they were also exposed to hazardous materials. In historical times, the various health risks have been repeatedly described, notably by Ramazzini (1700). Lead, poor working postures, noise, and other harmful conditions caused diseases through the same biological mechanisms as now.

However, the form of exposure to these “eternal” risks vary as the organization and technology of production change. To develop effective prevention, we need to know the more precise risks of various machines, chemicals, work organizations, etc. Large funds have been allocated to accumulate and disseminate such preventive oriented knowledge, especially since the major Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)/Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)¹ reforms of the 1970s and 1980s. At least in the Western world, the main cause of work-related ill health is therefore lack of action, not lack of knowledge. Those who control the organization and technology of production do much too little of what they know should be done to prevent occupational injuries and diseases. If they don’t personally know the right thing to do, they can find adequate advice if they only look for it.

Many of us think that we know what should be done and “only” have to improve its implementation. The outstanding achievement of this book is to lift a self-delusive veil from our eyes. Employers’ and managers’ lack of preventive measures remains a fundamental cause behind why workers are injured or fall ill from work. Yet Mayhew, Peterson, and their colleagues demonstrate how increased globalization, flexibility, and other related changes in the organization of production create new, more complex, and too often ignored patterns of risks at work. These risks become so prevalent that they can truly be called

¹ OHS and OSH are used interchangeably.

occupational epidemics. The various chapters of the book discuss the mechanisms behind these changes, such as international migration of hazardous production, precarious work, the shift toward service work and weakened worker resistance. On the other hand, they analyze the epidemic outcomes, e.g., the continuous growth of violence and stress.

All writers come from the Anglo-Saxon world, notably Australia. Yet their outlook is international and so is the relevance of the problems they describe. Even in Scandinavia—with a comparatively strong labor movement and active OSH policies—the same mechanisms result in the same health problems. The commuters of Stockholm recently both endured and supported a bus strike. The drivers' grievance of not even having time to pee was something everybody could understand. This, and many other problems, was the result of privatization and competitive tendering which had continuously squeezed resources and timetables. We too have, and will have, increasing work environment problems due to the flexibilization of production. This book offers a wealth of explanations to help understand the roots of epidemics and their forms.

One recurring theme of the book is especially important, that is, how risks are perceived. We can only act on our socially constructed perceptions of reality, not on any theoretically "true reality." How occupational risks are noted or not is therefore fundamental for how all involved—workers, politicians, employers, OSH researchers, and others—react to them. These actors have varying interests in OSH prevention and thus in getting information about OSH risks but they all base their actions on how they view the situation. Many chapters discuss how our understanding of the relation between risk causes and health effects is becoming more diffuse with the increased flexibilization of production. For example, when workers move between different jobs and are exposed to some materials at one workplace and to others at the next, the etiology of long latency diseases may be very difficult to trace. And when you have a precarious situation on the labor market, you are less prone to register injuries or compensation claims.

Both a reduced reporting and the obscuration of causes and effects makes official OHS statistics even more unreliable than they are today as indicators of occupational risks. Much governmental OSH prevention in practice boils down to minimization of workers' compensation figures. The longer and more complex causal chains described in this book may give ample excuse for further reductions in the acceptance of compensation claims. The gap between OSH politics and figures on the one hand, and work related ill health on the other, may therefore get even wider. Though workers themselves bear the worst part, the lack of recognition of the OSH risks may also increase the general societal costs of destroying the productivity of labor. Those who defend workers' health—as a human right but also as a societal resource—do well to learn about the more complex nature of risks as described in this book.

The book mainly describes and analyzes the changing nature of the OSH risks and of the mechanisms behind them. However, it also touches upon how new

structures of production affect various actors ability to promote prevention. For example, Peterson (Chapter 7) discusses how weaker unions have less clout to defend workers against ever increasing production demands, and the resulting stress. Messing et al. (Chapter 8) try to understand why even feminist researchers don't take much interest in the pain and possible serious health risks of standing work, mainly by low-skilled women in service jobs. And Quinlan (Chapter 4) describes how workers in temporary and other precarious jobs not only are exposed to worse risks, but also have even less power to demand improvements.

In all, the book presents a fairly grim picture of the development of occupational health and safety, even in the Western world with our OSH reforms and rhetoric. But the writers also give us some hope and point to possible ways forward. Mayhew (Chapter 11) analyzes and gives advice on early warning systems for new, large scale OSH risks. In his overview (Chapter 2), Walters sees some positive trends, not the least a growing public interest in participation in risk regulation, expressed, for example, in EU's directive on OSH management. Quinlan notices that a better enforcement of employers' general duty of care, including to third parties, could curb some of the OSH problems of precarious work. And Leigh (Chapter 5) discusses alternative hazard surveillance strategies, when connections between exposure and diseases become more complex.

Yet the main purpose and effect of the book is to be an important alarm signal. This is the way the nature of work is changing and these are some of the major health risks it creates. The major hope that Mayhew, Peterson, and the other excellent writers offer us is that by recognizing the warning signals, and understanding what is happening, we are better equipped to resist and instead promote the safe and decent work advocated by the ILO.

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