

Voices

**NOW IS THE TIME FOR US TO BECOME THE
LEADERS WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR**

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ABSTRACT

The budget crisis in California threatens to cut even more resources from the state workplace health and safety agency, Cal/OSHA. This crisis is completely artificial as there are tremendous resources in the state—if the corporations, and the rich who own them, paid taxes. But even with adequate funding, the goal of reducing worker injuries, illnesses, and fatalities can be achieved only by a grassroots occupational safety and health movement that empowers informed workers to be active in protecting their own health at work, and ensures that employers and government mobilize the resources required for safe and healthy workplaces. This is the text of a speech given at the Worksafe Mini-Summit for a Revitalized State Occupational Safety and Health Program, Emeryville, CA, March 25, 2011.

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Thanks very much to Worksafe for their kind invitation to speak at this important gathering today. I am very aware that I am almost literally preaching to the choir here, but I would like to speak about three things that I think are worth repeating:

1. What is our ultimate objective?
2. What is the current economic and political context?
3. What approach and activities are necessary to reach our goals?

The presentations and workshops today have been focused on important goals: comprehensive regulations and effective enforcement; employer commitment to dedicate sufficient resources (human, financial, and time) to protect worker health; and workers who know their rights and can act on them.

But our ultimate goal is not really one more piece of legislation, or the perfect regulation, or even a few more inspectors at Cal/OSHA, because we know that there will *never* be enough government inspectors, there will *always* be “low road” employers who exert downward pressure and create a race to the bottom for all employers, and there will *always* be new or previously unrecognized hazards.

The only way we can effectively respond to these certainties is if every workplace has knowledgeable, informed, empowered, and active workers.

Why workers? Because they are on site every day and on every shift; they are intimately familiar with the problems at work; they have ideas for solutions to these problems; they are the best monitors of employer behavior; and they are the most effective whistle-blowers for government regulatory agencies.

So this is really what our ultimate objective is—informed and active workers at every job site who are leading an OHS movement that is strong enough to motivate employers to do the right thing and motivate the government to do its job.

Secondly, what is the current context to achieve this objective?

Looking at what has been happening in Japan over the last several weeks, I think we all have realized how fragile life is on our planet. We can see clearly the dangers of corporate control of dangerous technologies where they routinely cut corners on safety and lie about it to all of us.

In the United States, we are witnessing the imposition of the neoliberalism that the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and “Washington Consensus” have imposed on the developing world for decades. This neoliberalism has come home to roost with draconian, truly barbaric cuts to essential social services, and severe attacks on our rights as workers, as citizens, as human beings.

This has been combined with a near-total corporate control of the political system in the United States—control of working people’s sources of information and analysis; control of both major political parties and their politicians; and control of the lobbyists who are the ones who actually run our political system via campaign contributions, writing and lobbying legislation, and dominating the regulatory system through a “revolving door” between agency staff and the corporations themselves.

Today the politicians of *both* parties—in *both* Washington and Sacramento—tell us we have to make “Sophie’s Choice”—“Which child are you going to give to the Nazis?”

That is: which services are we going to deny to children, which services are we going to deny the elderly, which services are we going to deny the ill and infirm, which services are we going to deny the poor and vulnerable?

These are the same choices that are always offered to workers and OHS professionals and activists:

- if you want a job, don't complain about the conditions;
- if you want benefits, don't support enforcement and compliance costs;
- if you want economic development, don't support health-protective regulations.

But *all* of these are *false choices*: we don't have to give the Nazis any of our children.

We live in a country of immense wealth and resources—the *Wall Street Journal* and Bloomberg business news have reported [1, 2]:

- corporate profit margins are the highest since 1993;
- corporations are now sitting on more than \$2 *trillion* dollars—unused and uninvested cash;
- S&P 500 company profits are expected to rise 16 percent in 2011;
- CEO bonuses at 50 major corporations jumped a median of 31 percent in 2010.

Congressional investigators have documented that since 1991 [3]:

- 56 percent of all income growth in the U.S. has gone to the top 1 percent of the population;
- one-third of this income growth has actually gone to just the top 0.1 percent of the population.

Here in California it is the same story. The non-partisan California Budget Project reports that in the 20 years leading to 2008 [4, 5]:

- the income of the top 10 percent of Californians increased 43 percent;
- the income of the top 1 percent of Californians rose 81 percent.

In the period 2001 to 2008, the Budget Project documented that [6, 7]:

- profits of California corporations increased 400 percent;
- but that state revenues coming from corporate taxes are down 50 percent since 1981.

Just today, the front page of the *New York Times* reported that the largest corporation in the United States—General Electric—had 2010 profits of \$14.2 billion, with \$5.1 billion from U.S. operations, but *did not pay a single dime* in federal taxes. In fact, they are in line to receive \$3.2 billion in tax subsidies from the people who do pay taxes [8].

In fact, both as the relative percentage of all taxes paid, and in the absolute amount paid, corporations pay fewer taxes today than when Ronald Reagan was President and when Ronald Reagan was Governor [9]. If the corporations paid the same taxes they did under Reagan—there would be *no* budget crisis today.

The Californian and U.S. governments do *not* have a spending problem—they have a *revenue* problem. Yet not a single Democratic or Republican politician has pointed out this simple fact and proposed to raise the taxes on corporations and the rich.

Our society has tremendous resources, but they are held by the wrong people and used for the wrong purposes—not the least of which is the \$2.5 billion we spend each and every week (and have for 10 years now) in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I think that OHS professionals and activists need to be mindful of this context because otherwise we will fall into a trap of fighting advocates for children, for the elderly, for medical care, housing and the environment over the budget scraps that are being swept off the table of riches that we have in this country.

There is nothing that the untaxed 0.1 percent would like better than to have allies fighting each other, rather than allies uniting to fight together for a just and humane society.

So, thirdly, given this context, what are the approach and activities that we as advocates of safe and healthy workplaces should undertake?

One could say that this context is impossibly grim. But I always think about other times in the history of our country when things were no better or worse. I am reminded of the words of Frederick Douglass—the escaped slave, abolitionist, and supporter of women's rights. In 1857—the year the U.S. Supreme Court declared in its *Dred Scott* decision that chattel slavery of Africans stolen from their homelands was legal, Constitutional, and permanent—Douglass said:

The limits of tyrants are proscribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress [10].

There is living proof of this today in Tunisia and Egypt, where working people hit the limit of their endurance and revolted. Who would have thought two months ago that the people of Egypt could overthrow a dictator who had every resource at his command—every resource that the U.S. government could provide him—but they did!

In the United States, it has been different, until very recently. The economic crisis in our country has been so deep, so shocking, that working people have been stunned, have hunkered down in the hopes that it all will blow over, and some workers have been successfully played off against others.

But Madison has broken the dam. The massive response in Wisconsin may have lost the battle over a specific bill, but the people have definitely *not* lost the war.

In Madison we saw a mass response led by the ranks without waiting for the leaders; an outreach to all working people; an effort to create, build and strengthen alliances; an effort to make solidarity and unity living realities.

This solidarity and unity was and is between private sector *and* public sector workers; between union *and* non-union workers; between farmers, workers, and students; between workers in manufacturing, in services, and in administrative jobs; between retired workers and those who have yet to start working or who have lost their jobs.

We here in California need to follow their example. One of the slogans in Madison was “walk like an Egyptian,” and we could say that we need to “rally like a cheesehead.”

These are *not* normal times we are living in today. If there was ever a time for “thinking outside the box,” for working outside our “comfort zone” and the comfort zones of our organizations, for simply refusing to take “no” for an answer, and for never, ever giving up—*this is the time*.

We have talked today about many specific projects—but the *key* to all of them is to build an OHS movement. Without a movement, we will never create the political will and pressure needed to pass new legislation, to enforce a new regulation, or hire more inspectors.

Building a movement means that we need to:

- educate ourselves about the issues—and not just our issues but those of the organizations and people who are our allies;
- educate our co-workers, family, and friends;
- reach out to new organizations and constituencies to start making friends and allies;
- create and strengthen alliances and joint activities;
- make solidarity and mutual aid the hallmarks of our work and our alliances.

Worksafe is working to create an activists network. All of us should join the network. Not only filling out the sheets, but to make a commitment. We need to commit ourselves to something specific and ongoing—the same way that the young people filled Tahrir Square every day in Cairo, the same way that people from all walks of life filled the State Capitol in Madison every day.

We need a network of activists that collectively “fires on all cylinders”—where everyone adds their grain of sand with whatever time they have available, in the area that they find most interesting or important, and on a regular basis and in collaboration with others.

We need a network that can do the outreach to new and old allies; that writes regular op-ed articles for newspapers, that solicits and does the radio shows, that launches and carries out the “action alerts;” that does the public education campaigns; and that does the legislative work.

One project that I have always hoped to see launched—and I pledge to work on it—is a speakers bureau of informed, knowledgeable volunteers to seek and carry

out speaking engagements anywhere and everywhere we can find an audience: local union meetings; central labor council meetings; OHS professional meetings; student events at colleges and high schools; meetings of immigrant community organizations; meetings of community institutions like churches, neighborhood associations, or retired workers groups; and the local meetings of local, state and national legislators.

There are many important and valuable possible projects—but the key is building a growing movement that can draw around us the people and popular power that can make all the specific projects successful.

We are living in extraordinary times, with extraordinary problems; and we need an extra-ordinary response.

In that same speech in 1857, Frederick Douglass said:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will [10].

The time has come for *us* to become the leaders we have been waiting for. This is our moment—Cairo and Madison show that it *can* be done and *we* can do it.
¡Si, se puede!

NOTES

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