

Labor and Environmentalists Join Forces For New Campaign

by Charles Griffith

Labor and environmental activists in Michigan are launching a new campaign to further the rights of workers and community members to reduce toxics and other hazards. Recognizing that toxic substances which endanger the lives of workers are the same substances which poison community residents and the environment, the two groups have formed a coalition and are embarking on a major toxics campaign. There are three central points to the campaign:

- 1) **Workers and Community Members need the Right-to-Act:** Workers and communities need broader rights to reduce toxics and other hazards.
- 2) **Reduction of Toxics:** establishing a regulatory environment that encourages companies to reduce toxics use, and
- 3) **Local Action is Essential:** laws alone aren't enough, we need citizen action to insure enforcement.

The Right-to-Act

Growing out of the Right-to-Know movement of the early 1980's, this new campaign represents the next logical step in the march to eliminate workplace and community hazards. The Right-to-Act has been legislatively mandated in several Canadian provinces and Scandinavian countries, and is now being considered in New Jersey, where legislation was recently introduced that would significantly expand worker and citizen rights to investigate and inspect workplace and environmental hazards.

The New Jersey legislation is supported by a coalition of over 125 labor and environmental groups. It has several components which activists in Michigan hope to enact here.

- Hazard Prevention Committees within workplaces would have the right to regularly inspect the facility, investigate accidents, and negotiate to reduce or eliminate occupational and environmental hazards.
- Workers would have certain rights to refuse unsafe work.
- Community members would have the right to establish special committees to periodically inspect facilities with an expert of their choosing. Grants from a state fund would help pay for the technical expert.
- Worker and citizen committees would have the ability to look at the full range of hazards and attempt to resolve problems in a comprehensive

WORKERS MEMORIAL DAY

**RIGHT TO KNOW
RIGHT TO ACT
RIGHT TO REFUSE**

WORKERS DEMAND THE RIGHT TO ACT

Each year on April 28, the unions of the AFL-CIO and others observe Worker Memorial Day to remember those who have suffered and died because of unsafe workplaces. This year in Michigan, 1,000 people marched on Lansing to demand safer workplaces. Workers demanded their Right-to-Know be expanded into the Right-to-Act, that is, they demanded the right to refuse unsafe work and a right to negotiate with management about working conditions. The workplace is America's forgotten environment where each day toxic substances, explosions and unsafe conditions kill and injure more than 20,000 workers nationwide.

manner--perhaps outside of the regulatory process. To the extent hazards can be eliminated before violations occur or conflict arises, this may even help to reduce costly and time-consuming regulatory actions.

Toxics Reduction

The Toxics Reduction movement grew from the recognition that our current fragmented regulatory system has not adequately stopped pollution.

The movement emphasizes "end-of-pipe" control strategies that shift toxics from air to water, or water to land. Former EPA Administrator, Lee Thomas, once admitted: "It is entirely possible that somewhere in the country toxic metals are being removed from the air, transferred to a wastewater stream, removed again by water pollution controls, converted to a sludge, shipped to an incinerator and returned to the air."

This approach doesn't attack the source of the problem: the use of toxic materials in production processes. The solution is pollution prevention, not pollution control.

Massachusetts and Oregon passed landmark toxics reduction laws in the last year. The Massachusetts law provides:

- a statewide goal of reducing by 50% the amount of hazardous waste generated
- mandatory toxics reduction plans
- a technical assistance program
- a research and training institute
- coordination between regulatory programs.

Citizen Action

To be successful, 'Right-to-Act' and toxics reduction must rely on grassroots activism. Citizens and workers will have to demand reductions through their 'Right-to-Act,' and will need to force regulatory agencies to stress reduction of toxics at the source.

Working Together: the need for a coalition

A key objective of a Right-to-Act/Toxics Reduction campaign is to break down barriers between workers, communities, and environmental organizations at the state and local level. While the Right-to-Know movement of the last decade raised a common fist of solidarity among workers and environmentalists, this new campaign will strengthen that alliance.