

MSU study indicates worker deaths rose as state's safety inspections dropped

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Raise the number of jobs. Cut the number of workplace inspections. What do you get?

More injuries. More deaths. And more "catastrophic" accidents where three or more workers are injured, said Mark Phillips of Michigan State University's School of Labor and Industrial Relations.

"For some reason beginning in the early 1990s, there was a notable drop in the number of inspections," Phillips told the House Labor Committee June 29 at a public hearing in Detroit. "John Engler," shouted someone in the audience.

And that's who got the blame as union leaders testified to state Rep. John Freeman, D-Madison Heights, about the toll in general industry and construction. No one from industry or worker's comp insurance companies asked to speak.

"Right-wing Republicans only want to talk about the fetus," said Bruce Burton, vice president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 58. "Well, I haven't been a fetus for 39 years. They need to do something for adult workers."

Freeman, who is seeking his party's nomination to succeed Attorney General Frank Kelley, encouraged unionists to "put pressure on government. You have to join a union to bring out respect. People with power run rampant over people like us."

Toll rises by '97

Phillips, the MSU expert, said general workplace deaths in Michigan due to a safety violation of any sort rose from 60 in fiscal 1991 to 76 in fiscal 1997. Other comparisons for the 1991-97 period:

- Construction fatalities rose from 18 to 36 as construction jobs expanded 60 percent and inexperienced workers entered the trades.

- Construction industry inspections fell by more than half from 8,511 to 3,245.

- Manufacturing fatalities rose from 17 to 24.

- General workplace inspections fell from 13,523 to 6,029.

- Catastrophic fatalities (more than three deaths) rose from 79 in 1991 to 143 in 1994, fell to 85 in 1996 but rose to 122 in 1997.

- Training of safety inspectors also fell.

Phillips said he ran into trouble even getting statistics from the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA). Prior to 1990, the books were on the shelves in the Michigan State Library in Lansing.

"Suddenly in 1990, MIOSHA dries up," he said. "For the right of the public to know, you would think the information would be available." The information was in state files, but he had to file extremely detailed Freedom of Information requests to get it. "I had to write a letter and name every chart and graph."

"From the standpoint of the public, you're going to give up (trying to get information) before you get done."

"Do they exist as publications? No. There's something they're hiding."

"I started to ask for case files, but those case files are destroyed after three years."

Phillips said MIOSHA followed the federal government's lead by "discounting" fines for workplace safety violations. Small firms (10 or fewer employees) get an 80 percent discount; the largest firms (250 or more) get no discount.

But small firms may be where the problem lies, he said, calling for more research on, among other topics, the effect of hefty fines on making workplaces safer.

Access cut off

Douglas Earle, director of safety and regulation in the state Department of Consumer and Industry Services, said one problem in counting workplace inspections is new different methods of counting.

"We don't have access to workers comp information form 100s," Earle said. The Legislature in 1994 amended the Freedom of Information Act to make such forms off-limits. Reasons were that some groups were using the names of claimants to "blacklist" them with employers. Another reason is that businesses were making FOIA requests to get financial information about competitors.

A second problem, Earle said, is that standards have changed and inspections take longer.

A third problem is that the Legislature raised penalties seven-fold in 1992. "There are more contested cases," he said, eating up state inspectors' time. "We want to focus on prevention. We don't want to follow up on accidents," Earle said. "The statute places responsibility for safety and health on employers," Earle said.

"If your philosophy is prevention," said Freeman, "it seems to me you should have high penalties."

It's your job

UAW Local 6000 representatives of Family Independence Agency caseworkers said they made long lists of complaints to management, but management's attitude was "It's your job. Be glad you have a job."

"We don't have near enough health inspectors in this state," said Richard Whitman of the AFL-CIO. "We have let that go downhill."

Ken Fletcher, also of the AFL-CIO, said one businessman senator "threw a fit" at even putting back three posts because "he doesn't want any more inspectors in his business."

The toll-free number for work safety complaints is 1-800-2MIOSHA. For fatal construction site accidents, the state's 24-hour hotline is 1-800-856-0397.



Caution, hot: Businessman Howard Shifman, grabs a quick cup of coffee at a downtown Birmingham coffee shop. Customers from throughout Oakland County suburbs are more often grabbing their morning cup of java at a coffeehouse, rather than at home.

Cafe? Olé!

Oakland's coffeehouses grow as hot as the brew they serve

Five years ago Jay Rosett envisioned a place where people could comfortably gather with friends or sit alone and enjoy a steamy cup of coffee and a novel.

Lonestar Coffee Co., 207 W. Old Woodward in Birmingham, became that place.

"People want a quality cup of coffee," said Rosett, store owner. "Coffee shops are going to be around forever."

With a clientele as varied as the coffee drink menu, coffee shops are considered the bars of the 90s. Some even offer live entertainment and poetry readings.

Regular customers of the locally-owned Lonestar said it's more than just a place to grab a quick cup of coffee. Dominic Bommarito, a Birmingham resident, considers the shop a gathering place where he can always find a friend and a cup of hazelnut coffee.

"It's a meeting place for me

and the guys," said Bommarito, who has been going there for two years. "Everyone you want to see is here sooner or later."

Megan Phelan, a sales assistant at Paine Webber across the street from the shop, stops in daily for breakfast and lunch. She said she started coming because of the convenient location, but now feels loyal to the staff.

"Because of customers like her, area store owners have not noticed a change in business even as more coffee shops pop up nearby. Rosett said he doesn't feel pressured by chain stores opening in the area. There will always be room for locally-owned shops, he said.

The market for a good cup of joe remains wide open.

Tanya Mitchell, who manages Caribou Coffee in Birmingham, said the popularity of coffee shops stems from a renewed interest in the caffeinated beverage itself.

"It used to be just something our parents drank," she said. "Now, it's not just that old strong cup of coffee. We have a lot of different kinds of coffee drinks for all kinds of people."

Every coffee shop develops its own technique for creating the perfect cup of coffee. Every coffee shop an atmosphere which caters to their clientele. It's a question of taste, said Randy Paul, store manager of Starbucks in Birmingham.

Successful chains, like Starbucks, which now has 10 stores in the metro Detroit area, shape each store to fit the clientele of its community.

"Each store has its own feeling," said Paul.

Royal Oak has a young clientele, compared to the more business and professional individuals who gather at the Birmingham location, he said. And the Starbucks in Somerset Collection mall, in Troy, caters to a wide variety of people.

■ "It's not just that old strong cup of coffee. We have a lot of different kinds of coffee drinks for all kinds of people."

Tanya Mitchell
—coffee house manager

Rose Rogala, manager of The Coffee Beanery in Rochester, said coffee shops are not only conducive to customers. She too enjoys working in a clean, quiet, relaxed atmosphere.

Mitchell, who considered Caribou to be her own hang out before she started working there, serves people who just stop in for a cup of coffee on the way to work, and others who will stay for hours.

"It's a social thing," she said. "There's a sense of family."

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