

Student Handout 9-Work Accidents and the Law

Work-Accidents and the Law.

To quote from Miss Eastman's conclusions:

At least 57 per cent of the steel mill fatalities are simple, and within the understanding of the ordinary man. One does not need the training of an engineer nor the experience of a mechanic to see how the side of a steel car may slip from crane chains and fall on a man below, or how a machinist walking a greasy beam sixty feet in the air may lose his balance, or how a pile of iron pipe may fall and crush a man or two if something gives out at the bottom of the pile. The large steel companies have long defended a policy of silence with regard to the number and character of their accidents, largely on the ground that any other policy would result in unintelligent hysterical outcry and clamor on the part of the public. If accidents in steel mills were altogether a result of processes which only experts can understand, there might be some reason in such a policy. But finding that at least 57 per cent of the fatal accidents studied were due to ordinary understandable causes, we can maintain not only that the public has a right to know the facts but that its possession of this knowledge is an important factor in the prevention of accidents.

If legislation is in view, there is a second significance in this 57 per cent of "simple" accidents. They serve to unite the steel industry with other industries in regard to its commonest accidents. Industrial railroads and traveling cranes are common in all large construction companies; in almost all factories there is repair work, cleaning, oiling, etc., to be done at a dangerous height; it would be hard to find a mill which does not use electricity. Therefore, legislation looking to the prevention of the commonest accidents of the steel mills need not be special legislation for one industry. It can be an extension of the present factory law. . . .

There can be no doubt that the unrelaxing tension and speed in the American steel mill makes for danger. To go slower would be to go backward in industry, and that is more than can be expected of America. But by shortening hours of work the dangers of speed can be lessened; the minds and bodies of the men can be kept up to the pace of the mill. Greater

intensity of work necessitates longer periods of relaxation. If the strain of the work cannot be lessened the duration must be. Think of the crane man, upon whose alertness and care depend the lives of several others. His is a hot, unpleasant, lonely job. There is no one to spell him. He cannot get down from his cab for any reason. And he works twelve hours every day in the year except Christmas and Fourth of July. No steel company can maintain that it has done everything to prevent accidents until it has reduced the working hours of men in such responsible positions.

Another observation which one cannot fail to make is not only that some companies maintain higher standards of safety than others, but that different plants of the same company, different parts of the same plant, are not kept up to equal standards of safety. The reason is obvious. "This isn't one of our best plants," an inspector will say. "You see, we're very much crowded here and that makes things more dangerous. Eventually, I suppose, we'll have to abandon this plant." Or, "This part of the mill is old. We haven't put safety devices in here. It would hardly pay. We are going to tear all this down in a few years." Ordinary business economy, to be sure. But meanwhile men go on working in the crowded plant where things are not safe; men go on working in the old, badly lighted part of the mill where it "isn't worth while" to put in guards.

This sort of economy is of a piece with that of the miner who wants to finish loading his car and takes his chance of a fall of slate by failing to put up needed posts. It is human nature, but taking chances with other men's lives ought not to be so easy."

If during the past twenty years the factory inspection laws of Pennsylvania had been adequately enforced in Pittsburgh, if every death and serious injury had by law carried with it a sure and considerable compensation to the family of the men injured, taking such chances would not have been so easy nor so cheap; nor the toll of suffering so large. Pennsylvania is without such state factory inspection or such compensation laws.