

Organizing for Better Lives

DANIEL M. BERMAN

Todd Jailer, Miriam Lara-Meloy, and Maggie Robbins, *The Workers' Guide to Health and Safety* (Berkeley, CA: Hesperian, 2015), 576 pages, \$34.95, paperback.

The new *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety*—with drawings on every page—is a fun read, which is an unusual thing to say about a book with such a serious intent. Garrett Brown, an industrial hygienist with decades of experience as an inspector and activist in California, Mexico, and Bangladesh, claimed with some justification that of all the books on occupational health and safety, “almost none...are accessible to workers or their organizations.”¹ The *Workers' Guide* is the first major book aimed at organizing for healthier conditions in the labor-intensive export industries of countries like Bangladesh and China, Mexico's *maquiladora* frontier, in Central America and Southeast Asia, and even in the United States itself, where for many, working and living conditions are being beaten down.²

The *Workers' Guide* is written and published by Hesperian, a nonprofit focused on health education, to target the needs of the millions of low-wage workers—mostly women and often in their teens—in the electronics, clothing, and shoe industries in the Global South. There, local contractors execute the assembly orders of consumer giants like Apple, Gap, Nike, and Walmart, which sell directly to consumers in the Global North and are thus potentially vulnerable to consumer boycotts—such as the college-based Worker Rights Consortium.³ This 564-page bible relates scores of stories about suffering and exploited workers in dozens of countries who learn to act on their own behalf. The idea is to inspire people to unite and fight alongside their colleagues for better working and living conditions in countries like Bangladesh and China, where labor protections are largely absent.

What is novel is how Hesperian's authors “field tested” the text, with groups of workers who in effect helped write the book. Local progressive leaders from unions, women's groups, and workers' centers were hired as “facilitators” to assemble workers from the targeted industries, and the proposed text was read to them for their informal comments. The worker-participants received nominal sums for transportation and food, but they

DANIEL M. BERMAN is a longtime activist for occupational safety and workers' rights. His books include *Death on the Job* and *Who Owns the Sun?*

were never paid a stipend, and their names were never recorded, to ensure honest feedback, free from fear of employer or police retaliation.

The local facilitators' hardest job was writing up the results of these field test sessions according to a strict protocol. Their reports became the basis for the text of the book. *Workers' Guide* lead author Todd Jailer—with eight years' experience as a cultural worker in El Salvador—was adamant that the goals and uses of Hesperian's "field testing" methodology are diametrically opposed to what capitalist advertising firms do in their focus groups in the United States.⁴ Rather than trying to sell some particular product, the worker-participants were encouraged to help frame messages with the goal of ending unjust working and living conditions. The point was for workers to get together to "talk story" and in the process learn to observe, analyze, and take action in their own interests.

The second half of the book is devoted to "Social Dangers and Solutions," and includes—among other subjects—concepts and images from a feminist perspective, sure to be attacked as immoral or pornographic in orthodox religious communities and countries. The chapter on "Reproductive and Sexual Health" includes a chart called "Information About Family Planning," which would outrage fundamentalist Christian, Muslim, or Jewish groups in the United States. This chart rates ten methods of "preventing pregnancy" from "best" ("implants"; "sex without intercourse"; "sterilization") to "least effective" ("pulling out—withdrawal") (386).

The "Violence" chapter discusses sexual assault in a frank manner, from harassment and grabbing to rape. The authors provide tips and suggestions for coping with the potential consequences of sexual assault, including vaginal tearing and pregnancy. If assaulted, women are encouraged to react with karate-style self-defense moves. The drawings that accompany the "Learn Self-Defense" section leave little to the imagination (332). The book's illustrated talk-stories—following Hesperian's model for its other books—should prove an excellent means of initiating discussions. The drawings of (mostly) women workers on every page, often with dialogue balloons, highlight the importance of group discussions to assess the challenges workers face, with the goal of taking action on the shop floor and in their neighborhoods. The authors expressed their hope that excerpts or the entire book will be published in local languages to make it more accessible to masses of workers. Already Chapter 4 ("Electronics Factories") has been translated into Chinese, and 1,000 copies have been photocopied and distributed in Southern China in a semi-clandestine fashion.⁵

The *Workers' Guide* advocates simple, obvious solutions to problems in the workplace: tables, chairs, and tools designed to fit workers; guards

on machines; replacement of dangerous airborne contaminants or their removal through ventilation; a pace and schedule that don't drive people to suicide; and factories that won't collapse or burn down due to criminal neglect. The book advises educators to encourage people "to participate and do things instead of just listening to someone talk" (29). By sharing stories about the positive results of collective action, the *Workers' Guide* shows how people can begin to resist an international economic system in which large capitalists seek out low-wage venues where they exercise near-absolute control over the costs and conditions of labor.

The approach in the *Workers' Guide* brings to mind David Bacon's series *Organizing Silicon Valley*, which analyzes the collapse of over two decades of labor union organizing activity in high tech after targeted companies abandoned Northern California. Rather than give up a modicum of control and provide decent wages and working conditions, giants like Apple and Levi Strauss—still headquartered in the Bay Area—moved production to low-wage, non-union venues, mainly overseas.

A typical case concerned Versatronix, the first high-tech factory to unionize in Northern California. In January 1993, in response to this successful organizing campaign, Versatronix shut its doors. "If the plant was going to close, we said let it close," said Sandra Gomez, one of the original organizers. "But as long as it was open, we were going to fight for our rights."⁶

With unionization of industrial workers stymied by runaway manufacturing—despite attempts to use the health-and-safety issue as a hook to unionize—many high-tech activists turned to investigating toxins in the industry, which they suspected was not so "clean" as the industry proclaimed. Silicon Valley activists Ted Smith and Mandy Hawes founded the Silicon Valley Toxic Coalition (SVTC) in the late 1970s to investigate whether local communities were being harmed by IBM and other high-tech firms. Under public pressure, the Semi-Conductor Industries Association sponsored a study of eleven members' factories, which they believed would disprove any connection between water and air contamination and the serious health problems developing among exposed workers and residents.

Instead, the opposite proved true. Research confirmed that ethylene glycol, for example, was linked to increased birth defects, and that exposure to trichloroethylene, xylene, benzene, and toluene may have been triggering birth defects as well as leukemia and other cancers among workers exposed on the job, and among local residents exposed to contaminated drinking water.⁷ The SVTC went on to campaign for municipal ordinances which regulate the underground storage of toxic wastes. As production boomed outside the United States, Smith and other activists

went on to share their knowledge and experience with worker and community activists around the world. Ultimately, the work of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition gave the lie to myths of a “clean” electronics industry, and that message has resounded emphatically wherever electronics products are produced and then broken down for scrap.⁸

A tragic illustration of the constant push for ever-lower production costs is the Rana Plaza building collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In April 2013, the five-story building caved in, killing 1,120 and injuring 2,500 of the 5,000 people who worked there. Large cracks had appeared in the building the day before it crashed to the ground, but the workers—who had been threatened with loss of a month’s wages if they stayed away from work the next day—came to work and died. Bangladesh—a country the size of Iowa with 160 million inhabitants, compared to Iowa’s three million—became ground zero for international and local activism on worker rights in the Global South.

Like the toll from the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City in 1911, the Rana Plaza horror was too blatant to simply explain away. Foreign NGOs and local activists began boring in on the conditions of the garment industry. Garment work is the source of 80 percent of the country’s foreign exchange and Bangladesh is, after China, the world’s second-largest exporter of readymade clothing to the Global North. In response to “huge worker protests” after the disaster, the government doubled the legal minimum wage to \$67 per month—equal to 23 cents an hour for the industry’s 70-hour work week.⁹ (The increase in wages may end up costing final consumers just 4 to 12 cents more for a T-shirt produced in Bangladesh.)¹⁰

The short-term outcome in Bangladesh has been the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, co-signed by major multinational clothing corporations, local garment contractors, and trade unions, where they exist. The Accord mandates that “Health and safety committees shall be required by the [multinational] signatory companies in all Bangladesh factories and worker members shall comprise no less than 50 percent of the committee and shall be chosen by the factory’s trade union, if present, and by democratic election among the workers where there is no trade union present.”¹¹ Two years after the slaughter, Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana was jailed for murder—along with dozens of others—and remains behind bars, awaiting trial.¹²

Since the Accord was instituted, 2,700 garment factories have been inspected, 80,000 hazards identified, and 32 factories shut down as unsafe. Much of the training for the new Bangladeshi inspection force has come from a volunteer corps of 70 U.S. and European worker health and safety

professionals, mostly at their own expense. For Garrett Brown, the role of workers in organizing for change has been critical: “These...are not helpless victims—they are very brave women facing incredible odds and we [professionals] can help them and do some of the most rewarding work of our lives.”¹³

For labor activists in the United States and elsewhere, this kind of “joint” accord between union-hostile multinationals and local employers may trigger skepticism, since the lead institution created—the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety—is led and funded by eighteen corporate buyers, including notorious union-buster Walmart. Lip service is paid to union representation and honest worker elections to create factory safety committees, even where there are no unions. A fund of \$42 million has been collected to implement safety retrofits in 580 garment factories by the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety and the Accord on Fire and Building Safety.¹⁴ This works out to about \$72,000 per factory, which sounds like small change for a five-year program of remodeling.¹⁵ The great international garment retailers in the Global North can now claim to be “doing something” to deal with the murderous working conditions in Bangladesh. Remarkably, forty-two Bangladeshi factory and building owners were arrested and charged with murder for the Rana Plaza slaughter, though two dozen are still fugitives from justice.¹⁶ (Whether anyone will ultimately be convicted is another story: in previous trials for negligent mass slaughter of workers in the United States, India, and Italy, wealthy business and corporate leaders have, in effect, gotten away with murder.)¹⁷

Still, the authors of the *Workers’ Guide* and other participants in the Bangladeshi reforms insist that something is much better than nothing, because the principle of worker representation is being established. In the United States, Mexico, and China, company unions or government-controlled unions have occasionally, through strenuous organizing efforts, morphed into labor unions and movements which truly represent the workers. In China, strikes and other rebellions are sometimes suppressed and sometimes lead to local reforms and the freedom to organize. The Taiwanese-owned electronics giant Foxconn, with over a million workers in China alone, was forced to increase wages and benefits after one worker suicide and eighteen well-publicized suicide attempts, along with the death from exhaustion of a skilled worker, Yan Li, who was forced to work thirty-four hours in a row (85).

In May 2014, workers at the Japanese-owned Sumida factory in the City of Guangzhou successfully formed a functioning trade union with democratically elected leaders independent of the government-controlled

All-China Federation of Trade Unions. At least 1,000 strikes were reported in China from June 2011 through the end of 2013, 40 percent of them involving factory workers. In 2012 the Shenzhen Trade Union Federation announced that every one of the city's 163 factories would be allowed to elect their own trade union leaders by 2017.¹⁸ Hopefully a seed has been planted in Bangladesh and China and elsewhere—despite continuing harassment and even murder of union activists—which will lead to more worker union organizing and attention to health and safety. Maybe the movement will proceed to spin out of corporate control and effect lasting changes in wages and in working and living conditions.

To some extent the approach of the *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety* has been foreshadowed by well-received books like Stelman and Daum's *Work Is Dangerous to Your Health*, which was expanded from a health and safety manual for a course conducted by District 8 of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers in New York and New Jersey, under the tutelage of legendary union health and safety pioneer Anthony Mazzocchi.¹⁹ *Work Is Dangerous* made available to workers and their unions health-hazard information which had previously been locked away in professional tomes and libraries. Towards the end of their book, the authors extended their analysis beyond chemical threats with a discussion of stress as a dangerous product of boring, repetitive work, excessive working hours, and powerlessness. "What Is To Be Done?" the book's final chapter, emphasized the importance of collective, local action by (presumably unionized) workers to fight for healthier conditions. However, the link between sweatshop production platforms overseas and in "third world" enclaves in the U.S.—which other activists strove to address—never came up in the book by Stelman and Daum.²⁰

The *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety*, with its broad concept of "Social Dangers"—incorporating both working and living conditions—goes beyond previous books in the field in dealing in an accessible manner with the lives of low-wage workers in the "Global South." Where workers are absolutely powerless, anything which seems to promise a better day can have a subversive, leavening effect on the old order. At some point big capital, which, as Marx and Engels wrote, will "nestle everywhere, settle everywhere...over the whole surface of the globe," may eventually run out of places to run for cheap, docile labor, as the local becomes international and the international local.²¹ The *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety* is a long book, but far from an academic treatise, it is a practical guide for grassroots activists fighting for a better future. With its unique approach to organizing, it deserves a serious look by people and groups who strive to empower workers and their communities around the world.

Notes

1. Comments in phone interview June 5, 2015 and at book launch, Berkeley, California, June 12, 2015. The Workers' Guide took 18 years to finish, with fits and starts due to funding problems. Brown merited "special thanks" as "god-father" of the book.
2. Unionization rates in the U.S. private sector have plummeted from the about 25 percent in the mid-1970s to under 7 percent in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, and real wages stagnated. The Fight for 15 struggles, the Black Lives Matter movement, the new workers' centers for low-wage immigrants and the poor, and the mass campaigns against fossil fuels are among the hopeful signs of challenge to the dominant neoliberal ideology.
3. First organized in 2001 as an offshoot of United Students Against Sweatshops, the group has affiliates in over 180 colleges and universities which license sweatshirts and other items featuring college logos.
4. "Publisher and activist" are Jailer's terms for his work in El Salvador, according to a June 5, 2015, telephone conversation with the author.
5. China's national government is working on new draft laws to increase police surveillance of foreign NGOs by the Public Security Ministry as "potential criminals," according to William Nee, a researcher for Amnesty International (Edward Wong, "Chinese Security Laws Elevate the Party and Stifle Dissent. Mao Would Approve," *New York Times*, May 29, 2015).
6. Wong, "Chinese Security Laws." Versatronix was organized into the United Electrical Workers, a union which was nearly liquidated in the postwar red scare, but which maintains an unyielding commitment to social justice and worker organizing, and to the rule that no national officer of the union may earn more than its highest-paid member. See their famous book *Them and Us* (Pittsburgh: United Electrical Workers, 1995). Robin Baker and others co-founded the Electronics Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (ECOSH) in the San Jose area in the late 1970s, but unionization proved to be a tough nut to crack. For brief remarks about ECOSH, see Daniel M. Berman, "Grassroots Coalitions in Health and Safety: the COSH Groups," *Labor Studies Journal* 6, no. 1, (1981):104-13.
7. David Lazarus, "Toxic Technology: Critics Say Chemicals Used in Making Chips Cause Serious Illnesses," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 3, 2000.
8. See Ted Smith, David Sonnenfeld, and David Naquib Fellow, *Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice in the Electronics Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006) or go to <http://svtc.org>, website of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition.
9. Garrett Brown, "Keeping Bangladeshi Garment Workers' Lives Safe and Sound," presentation at annual convention of the American Industrial Hygiene Association, June 2015. Bangladeshi garment exports to the United States and Europe totaled \$24 billion in 2014.
10. If Bangladeshi wages added 2 to 5 cents (in Euros) to the price of each t-shirt before the recent doubling of wages to \$67 per month, it makes sense that that doubling would add 2 to 5 cents (Euro) or more to the sales price.
11. Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, May 13, 2013, <http://bangladeshaccord.org>.
12. Author's telephone conversation with Garrett Brown, April 6, 2016. Brown had recently returned from Bangladesh.
13. Garrett Brown, "Keeping Bangladeshi Garment Workers' Lives Safe and Sound."
14. Lindsey Rupp, "Walmart to GAP Group Starts \$42 million Bangladesh Fund," *Bloomberg News*, July 10, 2013, <http://bloomberg.com>.
15. If in fact there are close to 3,000 clothing factories in Bangladesh, \$42 million works out to \$14,000 per factory.
16. Shashank Bengali and Mohiuddin Kader, "Bangladesh factory owner, 41 others charged with murder in 1,100 deaths," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2015.
17. In the United States: Martin Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986). Cherniack's pellucid book recounts the story of over 700 mostly African-American workers who were killed by acute silicosis while drilling a water tunnel through almost pure crystalline silica in the early 1930s in West Virginia. They were employed by a contractor working on behalf of a Union Carbide subsidiary. Most victims were quickly buried in unmarked graves. In India: Sidhar Pappu, "The Bhopal Evasion," *Mother Jones* (November/December 2006), <http://motherjones.com>. For an early book regarding Union Carbide's Bhopal massacre, see Larry Everest, *Behind the Poison Cloud: Union Carbide's Bhopal Massacre* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986). In Italy: billionaire Swiss asbestocement magnate Stephan Schmidheiny was sentenced to 18 years of prison for his role in the deaths of over 3,000 workers and citizens in Casale Monferrato who died of asbestos diseases like mesothelioma at his factory in Casale Monferrato. That sentence was overturned in November 2014 by Italy's highest court on a statute-of-limitations defense in November 2014 (See Ed Stannard, "Billionaire with honorary Yale degree has conviction overturned in asbestos deaths case," *New Haven Register*, Nov. 24, 2015. For some background on Schmidheiny's honorary degree, see Daniel M. Berman, "Asbestos Magnate of Environmental Guru: The Trials of Stephan Schmidheiny," in *Eternity and the Great Asbestos Trial*, David Allen and Laurie Kazen-Allen, eds. (London: International Ban Asbestos Secretariat, 2012), available at <http://ibasecretariat.org>. A defect of the *Workers' Guide* is the absence of any discussion of international campaigns to ban asbestos sales and use, which has already been ratified by 45 countries around the world. Russia now mines over half the world's asbestos, while Canada, the former leader, has shut down its mines. According to the 2013 *Minerals Yearbook*, published by the U.S. Geological Survey, China and India together consume over half the world's asbestos—guaranteeing a full-blown cancer epidemic among coming generations in those countries, and in others like Brazil, now the world's third-largest asbestos producer after Russia and China.
18. Han Yuan, "Protests, suicide: China's labor unrest leads to reform," CNN, September 5, 2014. This article recounts the story of the firing and suicide of a 48-year-old woman who had worked with an activist organizing campaign at GCL Footwear factory and was one of 100 workers fired for raising labor issues.
19. Jeanne M. Stellman and Susan M. Daum, *Work Is Dangerous to Your Health* (New York: Vintage, 1973). Stellman founded the Scientists Committee for Occupational Health to recruit more technical help to the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. The book sold over a 100,000 copies and was translated into at least 20 languages, according to Les Leopold, *The Man Who Hated Work and Loved Labor: The Life and Times of Tony Mazzocchi* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2007), 292-94.
20. Barry Castleman, "Industries Export Hazards—U.S. Companies Located in Non-Regulating Havens in Third World," *Multinational Monitor* 1, no. 1 (1978), <http://multinationalmonitor.org>. See also Daniel Berman, "International Competition and the Degradation of Working Conditions," in *Death on the Job* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 182-86.
21. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 7.