

# BUILDING WORKER POWER THROUGH HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES



## What are worker-led health and safety committees?

Organized groups of workers who work together to improve health and safety at the workplace. Sometimes they could include allies, but they cannot exist without a core group of committed worker leaders who are directly affected by the hazards that workers have identified on the job. Generally, committees can be either worker-only or worker-management. It's always advisable to have a worker-only committee even if a worker-management committee also exists.

## HOW CAN HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES BUILD WORKER POWER?

- Clearly define and prioritize worker demands for a safe workplace.
- Create leadership roles for workers to build collective strength.
- Communicate to management that workers demand a safe, healthy work environment.
- Plan and execute actions to improve workplace safety, and demonstrate the power of collective action to win even broader change.

## Why is workplace health and safety such an important issue for organizing workers?

- Workers are the experts at their job and often know the dangers and improvements needed in their workplace. They are in the best position to hold their employers accountable on their legal responsibility to provide a safe workplace.
- At its core, organizing is about winning change through collective action around an issue that workers care about.
- With health and safety issues, a lot is at stake—even, sometimes, a worker's life. By organizing around health and safety issues, committees can both tap into deep motivations for change among co-workers and overcome some of the fear that comes with confronting an employer.
- Safety is a legal, moral, and civil right for all workers.
- The public and community support worker safety. When an employer is exposed for dangerous working conditions, everyone—both workers and the public—see the real value that employer places on the lives of its workers.



## STEPS TO BUILD WORKER POWER THROUGH HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES

- **Organize the Committee.** Identify leaders who will drive the [day-to-day work of the committee](#) and take ownership over making it work.
- **Build Membership.** Leaders continue to recruit other leaders, and build interest in the committee among other workers.
- **Understand the issues** through [surveys](#), one-on-one conversations, and other tools such as [hazard mapping](#) and [body mapping](#) that help identify serious issues that may not be immediately obvious.
- **Educate** workers around key issues, and **regularly communicate** the work the committee is doing.
- **Strategize** about how to build support for the committee among membership and apply pressure to management to make changes
- **Document issues** through [complaints](#), letters, photos, etc.
- **Demand action** from the employer in meetings, through letters and petitions, and through other workplace and public actions.
- **Celebrate victories** throughout the campaign, including the smaller victories you win along the way.
- **Revise the plan** when needed and implement until you win. This [Self Evaluation Tool for an Effective Committee](#) might help improve your committee's effectiveness.

## HOW CAN HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEES GET SET UP?

While there are legal and contractual ways to establish committees, workers who face serious hazards shouldn't wait for these formal measures to set up a committee. For a committee to exist all it really needs is a group of workers who are willing to organize and fight for safe and healthy workplaces.

- Workers could organize themselves to start the committee.
- Laws can mandate worksite health and safety committees.
- Contracts or agreements between management and workers can formalize a health and safety committee.
- Workers can demand their employer to meet with them about health and safety conditions.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMITTEES THAT CAN WORK ON HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES?

### 1. WORKER-ONLY COMMITTEES

- Workers in a common workplace or with a common employer coming together with a strategic plan to improve workplace health and safety while building worker power.
- Workers with different employers or even different industries advocating for safety improvements in a region. COSH groups are an example of worker advocate committees.

#### What could be the agenda for worker-only health and safety committees?

- Issues for the [agenda](#) should come from worker concerns or known incidents or industry/ OSHA requirements.
- It's important to always be thinking about issues that respond to worker concerns and build worker power.
- Developing workplace campaigns to support workers and gain community support.
- Provide education and training to make workers aware of their rights and tools they can use to identify and control hazards.
- [Highlight serious incidents](#) that injure workers to call for preventing future incidents.
- Develop alliances with safety agencies and organizations to demand the best protection for workers.



## 2. JOINT WORKER-MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

- Joint worker-management committees can review and advise the health and safety program in a workplace or multiple workplaces. *[Note: Worker-management committees are often set up by a union contract or law.]*
- Because of management’s presence and balancing power dynamics, there is a real risk for joint health and safety committees to not be as effective as they need to be to make real improvements and prevent serious injuries to workers. They can be a dead-end where safety gets talked about without making improvements. Even worse, many joint committees focus on workers being the “problem” instead of being part of the “solution” in the safety program.
- It is advisable to have a worker-only committee even in workplaces where a labor-management committee exists to push for improvements in safety and health that workers need.
- Here is a [Model Letter Establishing a Workplace Health and Safety Committee](#) as an example.

### Some recommendations for effective joint health and safety committees

- Create a worker/union-only committee to bring priority concerns to labor-management meetings.
- Being in sync with the workers is the primary tool for health and safety committee members. This could be done with one-on-one discussions, [surveys](#), polls, meetings, or other ways to get feedback from workers.
- Identify hazards so workers and unions can take charge of the agenda, using tools such as [worker surveys](#), [hazard mapping](#), and [body mapping](#).
- [Documenting](#) and tracking health and safety issues is an important role of the committee’s worker representatives. Photos, videos, journaling and other recordkeeping can be helpful to create a record of safety issues.
- Investigate and address all the health and safety issues in the workplace. These may include issues such as:
  - Safety hazards like falls, vehicles, machine guarding, etc.
  - Health hazards like chemicals, infectious diseases, noise, etc.
  - Organizational hazards like inadequate staffing, lack of resources to safely get the job done and speedup that makes it hard to use safety methods.
- Become aware of all of the safety and health resources to help the committee be effective in protecting workers and building worker power. See some links to safety organizations at the end of this fact sheet.
- [Investigate](#) any incidents or reports of “close calls” to identify all the possible contributing factors that can be changed to correct the hazard. Make sure that workers are listened to and part of the process to identify problems and solutions.
- Always “close the loop” back to workers to show what is being done to try and get better health and safety improvements on the job.



### Anticipate the ways management could weaken a joint health and safety committee and have a plan to respond.

- Letting management dominate the committee by chairing, setting the agenda, and setting the tone of meetings.
- Not having the program be worker-based and worker-friendly. Workers are the most important resource of any health and safety program and need to be valued for all the knowledge and skill they bring to the safety program.
- Management typically wants to focus on low numbers of injury reports to prove the current program is working well. Injury reporting numbers usually do not tell the real story. Many injuries and ‘close calls’ don’t get recorded due to management systems that make workers not want to report injuries. Mandatory drug testing related to incident reports is one example, but there are many more.
- Allowing management to blame workers for injuries by citing unsafe behaviors or other excuses rather than unsafe conditions in the workplace.
- Having the committee only meet once a month [or less] with no follow-up to investigate injuries and time to talk with workers.



## Some tips for getting safety improvements in committees

- Don't let disagreements get personal. Try to get agreements from management to make progress whenever you can and keep working for improvements.
- Don't let management use intimidation, retaliation or harassment to drive a wedge between workers and the health and safety program.
- Don't let management excuses drain energy from the committee. Plan to use leverage points to send the message that progress has to be made and use escalation tactics as you build your base and the campaign. Reports to higher management, involving OSHA or other collective job actions, can be used to send a message to management that safety is serious business, giving management many opportunities to do the right thing and bigger consequences every time they don't.
- Listen to management views and respond with questions and information to support the issues the worker side of the committee is presenting.

## WHY SHOULD MANAGEMENT AGREE TO HAVE A HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE?

- Workplace health and safety committees have been proven to reduce injuries and help create a cooperative work environment.
- Workplaces with a health and safety committee show a good faith effort to listen to worker input.
- Many health and safety committees have been set up through contract negotiations and legal requirements.

## HOW MIGHT A HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE INTERACT WITH OSHA?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets and enforces standards that ensure safe and healthful working conditions for workers. The employer is legally responsible to maintain a workplace “free from recognized hazards” [OSHA ACT Section 5A1]. The reality is that OSHA does not have enough resources or authority to ensure that all workplaces will be safe all the time. Through strategic use of safety tools and having the leverage of calling OSHA if the employer does not correct unsafe conditions in a timely fashion, committees can help realize the goal of the OSHA act to protect worker rights and prevent injuries in the future. It's important to build alliances with OSHA and know how they can support workers' safety rights.

## Additional Resources

**National COSH:** <https://nationalcosh.org/>

**Find a local COSH group near you:** <https://nationalcosh.org/COSHGroupsList>

**OSHA:** <https://www.osha.gov/>

**NIOSH:** <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/index.htm>

**AFL-CIO:** <https://aflcio.org/safe-at-work/workplace-safety>

International: **Hazards Organization:** <https://www.hazards.org/index1.htm>

NY Heros Act: **[H&S committees provision]:** <https://dol.ny.gov/ny-hero-act>

Los Angeles: **Worker Public Health Councils:** <https://publichealthcouncils.org/>

*This information is brought to you by the National Council on Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH)—spearheading a movement of worker leaders and advocates committed to promoting safe and healthy working conditions for all working people through education, organizing, and advocacy.*