BOOK REVIEWS

ASSAULT ON THE WORKERS: OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN CANADA, by Charles E. Reasons, Lois L. Ross, and Craig Paterson, Butterworths, Toronto, 1981, pp. xvi and 312, $17.35.

A social scientist, journalist and lawyer collaborate to provide a well documented account of the assault by chemical (asbestos, plastics), physical (noise, heat), biological (radiation) hazards and stress (job pressure, sexual harassment) on this nation's industrial workers, farmers, and female clerical and textile workers. Attention is focused on the work environment itself and the accusing finger is pointed at industry, government and organized labour for failing to recognize that "no matter how educated or trained workers are, if a workplace is unsafe or unhealthy, violence will occur to workers". Work itself is identified as a social problem.

Chapters 2 to 6 are descriptions of different work situations and the hazards that are associated with them. The authors provide information on fatality incidence rates for occupation types and proven occupational carcinogens. As well, they present detailed hazard inventories for different types of employment. Case history profiles describe personal experiences with asbestos, coal dust, grain dust, and near-fatal industrial accidents. These often poignant profiles also expose the politics of Worker's Compensation Boards.

The most important chapters in the book are chapters 7 to 10. They expose the myth of the "dumb worker" and examine the ethos and structure of occupational health and safety administration in Canada. A critical history of provincial Compensation Boards and Canadian enforcement legislation is provided. WCB's are described as bureaucracies which handle huge volumes of claims, employ staffs of thousands, and generate and invest billions of dollars. Evidence for economic and political ties between the boards (there are 12 in Canada), trade unions, branches of government, labor relations boards, and industry itself (e.g. staff doctors) leads the authors to conclude that the ideology of blaming the victim is in fact a political weapon of business and government. One questions whether compensation is aimed at the worker: not all workers are covered, and waiting periods, compensation ceilings and payment limits actually save Canadian industry and business millions of dollars annually. An analysis of regulatory laws administered by regulatory authorities (Industrial Safety Council, Labour and Manpower, etc.) reveals that prosecution is rare. Convictions are rarer still. For example, in Alberta in 1977 there were 9,888 violations cited under provincial statute – only two resulted in prosecutions. The average fine for successful prosecutions in Alberta during 1977-78 was $200. Recent statistics are much the same. Legal arguments have therefore been put forward to encourage "criminalization" of violations of worker's health, that is, to make negligent employers responsible under sections of the criminal code.[1] Proponents of the "health and safety before profits" philosophy have challenged both the legal system and the legal profession to respond. The response has been wholeheartedly in favor of that philosophy.

This book is about occupational health and safety from the worker's

perspective. Lawyers and law students interested or involved in labor will appreciate the human side of profits, quotas, and factory life. Law, as the authors plead, is the tool that can achieve long overdue reform in the workplace.

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1. H. Glasbeek, S. Rowland "Are Injuring and Killing at Work Crimes?" (1979) 17 *Osgoode Hall L.J.* 507.