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IS IT SAFE TO WORK?
A Study of Industrial Accidents

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BY

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PREFACE

WHY must thousands of persons be killed and injured annually in American industry, when reliable authorities agree that 75 per cent, or more, of all accidents could be avoided? Why should we permit our great industrial system to function so inefficiently, when a few employers in each line of production have shown that automobiles, steel, gunpowder, clothes, and all other articles can be produced profitably without the killing and maiming of workers? Why is it that we who have such a hatred for war condone a continual battle field in industry, where the casualties exceed those of war?

This book attempts to answer these questions. In doing so, it calls attention to gross injustices in our present workmen's compensation system, and shows that a scientific treatment of the injury problem has been made impossible because of the conditions surrounding the passage and administration of accident, compensation, and vocational rehabilitation legislation.

There is no one direct and simple answer. The complicated and many-sided nature of our problem makes it difficult of solution, and requires us to make frequent journeys into what at first may appear to be unrelated territory.

A superficial examination of this work may lead to the conclusion that it embodies an attempt to cover three different and unrelated subjects — industrial accidents, workmen's compensation, and vocational rehabilitation.

In part, this conclusion is justified; three different subjects are under consideration. But they are not unrelated; they are mutually dependent.

The prevention of industrial accidents has usually been associated with machine guards, warning signs, and safety engineers. Workmen's compensation insurance has been developed primarily to pay injury benefits, rather than to prevent accidents. Vocational rehabilitation has been instituted to retrain disabled persons who could not reestablish themselves financially. There has not appeared to be any relationship between such seemingly diverse things as safety guards and insurance premiums, or weekly benefits and classes in bookkeeping.

Gradually, however, the idea has gained credence that there might be an intimate relation between industrial accidents and workmen's compensation insurance. Here and there, an actuary has attempted to persuade employers that they might reduce their premium rates if they could curtail the number and seriousness of industrial accidents. Other persons, interested more in the safety of the workman than in the amount of premiums which the employer had to pay, have seen that the problem of safety is a pecuniary one, and that its solution, therefore, demands something more than the application of safety engineering knowledge to the technique of production.

When the State Boards for directing the work of vocational rehabilitation were established, it became a rather general custom to place on the Board one or more persons interested in workmen's compensation. In some States the retraining of disabled persons was administratively

linked with workmen's compensation. In a few jurisdictions the authorities have gone so far as to allow additional benefits when the injured person has consented to be rehabilitated. Occasionally, also, money has been provided for the purchase of artificial limbs.

With the exception of these rather significant gestures (and they amount to but little more), the potential relationships existing between accident prevention, workmen's compensation, and rehabilitation still remain for the most part unappreciated. As long as this situation continues, the progress of accident prevention will be retarded, crippled persons will not receive compensation benefits commensurate with their sacrifices, and the work of retraining the disabled will fall short of its possible effectiveness.

In this book accident prevention, workmen's compensation, and vocational rehabilitation are treated as integral parts of an attempt to have goods and services produced with a minimum of sacrifice on the part of workers. Accident prevention is made the desired goal; workmen's compensation is regarded as the best tool to promote safety; vocational rehabilitation is conceived as the remedy to be used only when safety is not realized. In this capacity it is justified, because it conserves for society at least a part of the productive power of the disabled worker, while it enables him to become partially or wholly self-supporting.

The position is here taken that safety measures will be put forth to the extent that industrial accidents are made important items in production costs. The establishments with a low accident rate must be rewarded by

being permitted to pay smaller compensation insurance premiums than does the concern with a high accident rate. Not only must these accident costs vary with the degree of safety achieved by the different employers, but the margin between them must be sufficiently great to make injuries expensive — so expensive that the company with the poor record will realize that a failure to make its plant safe will place it at a competitive disadvantage.

Higher compensation premiums will also make possible more liberal disability and death benefits. Larger benefits are desirable, because at the present time the benefits paid fall far short of compensating for wage losses caused by injuries. These wage losses, if not properly compensated by workmen's compensation benefits, lower the standard of living of the persons involved, and work a hardship upon the whole community.

There is the possibility, however, that benefits may be made so liberal that some injured workers will be unwilling to attempt to retrain themselves for useful tasks. Rehabilitation under such circumstances may result in complete failure; the injured worker may be idle when he could be productive. In other words, while compensation based upon loss of earning power is advocated as the basis of paying disability benefits, the actual loss compensated for must be the difference between the original earning power of the injured worker and that which he is able to earn after rehabilitation.

The problem under discussion raises many difficulties because it is in the nature of a dilemma. The dilemma is this: Unless benefits are made high enough to necessitate

larger compensation insurance premiums, the number of accidents will not be reduced; but if the benefits are made too liberal, attempts at rehabilitation may be defeated.

The basic problem under consideration, then, seems to be to find ways and means of making industrial accidents more costly to employers than heretofore, and at the same time of retaining the proper incentive for disabled persons to accept retraining. To differentiate between the careless and the careful employer, to conserve earning capacity whenever possible, and then to compensate for whatever deficiency remains, constitute the program. Such a program is possible only when, prevention, compensation, and retraining are viewed as related parts of one comprehensive whole.

The author has received valuable suggestions and other assistance from many persons, for which he wishes to make acknowledgment and to express appreciation.

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