

General Field Talking Points for Workers Memorial Day, 2007

- Each year on Workers Memorial Day, working people throughout the world mourn for the people who were hurt or killed on the job, and renew our struggle for safe workplaces.
- The best way to make sure workplaces are safe is to make sure workers have the freedom to join together in a union.
- Together, workers can fight to make their issues a priority. Together, workers can fight to keep and create good jobs in this country. Together, workers can fight for safe jobs.
- Today -- in town squares and union halls, in front of manufacturing plants and memorials, in community after community -- we have gathered to do just that -- to fight for safe workplaces and for good jobs -- jobs that pay decent wages and provide health care and pensions.
- Last year, a series of coal mine tragedies focused the nation's attention on the dangers faced by workers. Twelve men died after an explosion at the Sago mine in West Virginia. Within just a few weeks time, disasters at 8 other mines claimed additional lives. And by the end of 2006, 47 coal miners had lost their lives -- twice the number as the year before.
- These mine disasters brought public outrage about the weaknesses in job safety protections. They spurred Congress to strengthen the mine safety law. But workers shouldn't have to die before the government takes action.
- The Sago disaster and these unnecessary deaths were not an isolated event. Each year thousands of workers are killed and millions more injured or made sick. But most of these workers die one at a time, their deaths drawing little public attention.
- Each of these deaths is just as much of a tragedy, just as much of a loss, and just as unnecessary as the 12 who died at the Sago mine.
- Over the last several decades, we've made a lot of progress in protecting workers on the job. Fatality and injury rates have fallen dramatically in many industries.
- But now that progress is halting, and may be reversing. Last year more than 5,700 workers were killed by job injuries. Another 50,000 -- 60,000 died from occupational diseases, including more than 10,000 deaths from asbestos-related diseases.

- For Hispanic and immigrant workers the situation is much worse. Workplace deaths have increased sharply, as many of these workers work in the most dangerous industries and jobs, exploited by employers, with little or no protection.
- Each year, millions of more workers are injured – like poultry workers, truck drivers and nurses who suffer epidemic rates of repetitive motion injuries. Workers like those at... (*name workplace in your area which is unsafe.*)
- On top of this workers are facing new and emerging hazards like bioterrorism and chemical security threats. Just over the horizon is the very real threat of a flu pandemic, which would put millions of health care workers and other first responders on the front line, with no adequate measures now in place to protect them.
- And more than 8 million public employees still have no OSHA coverage and no legal rights or job safety protections.
- But since taking office in 2001, the Bush administration has turned its back on workers and workplace safety. Siding with its corporate friends, the administration has overturned or blocked dozens of important workplace protections including OSHA's ergonomics standard and new protections on tuberculosis, indoor air quality, reactive chemicals and cancer-causing substances to name but a few.
- At MSHA – the mine safety agency – the administration killed 17 safety rules under development including rules on mine rescue teams, self contained self rescue devices, and emergency escape ways – all of which could have helped save the 12 miners who died at the Sago mine.
- At both OSHA and MSHA, voluntary compliance has been promoted over enforcement, and industry representatives put in charge of the government job safety programs. This is just plain wrong.
- Who are we to demand these protections? We are the hotel workers, janitors, manufacturing workers, teachers, telephone operators, truckers, office workers (*add more here*) who make our community run in times of crisis, and day-to-day, but whose jobs are being threatened.
- If unions don't fight for safe workplaces, and to keep good jobs in the United States, then who will?
- Union members have long pushed for safe jobs and for good jobs. We fought for and won the OSHA law in 1970 and the federal laws to protect miners in 1969, 1977 and 2006. We've exposed brown and black lung disease until they are nowhere near the killers they once were. We've organized workers to fight for safe workplaces, to collectively bargain for contract language that protects us,

where federal laws cannot. We've formed and worked on safety and health committees to improve safety and health in our workplaces. We fought for and won a 40-hour work week. We fought for and won healthcare benefits and strong pensions. And now all of these gains are being threatened.

- We still have a lot of fighting to do to make workplaces much safer and to make sure that the clock is not turned back and that the U.S. does not become a low-wage economy where safety is ignored and workers are disposable.
- Workers Memorial Day 2007 is a day on which we call for an end to such injustices, and rededicate ourselves to the fight to make workplaces safer and to make our community stronger.
- It's a day on which we call for job safety laws to be strengthened to provide all workers the protections they need and deserve.
- And this year, it's a day that we call for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, to restore workers' right to join a union so that they can have a real voice and be protected on the job.
- Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, the great labor leader of the turn-of-the-century coal mines, called us to "Mourn for the Dead, and Fight for the Living!"
- We mourn, we remember, and we will never stop fighting.