Challenges to Worker Participation in EH&S Committees in China

Garrett D. Brown, MPH, CIH
AIHCE -- June 2007
China: Global Factory Floor

- 10 years of 10% annual growth
- Became 4th largest economy in 2005
- Manufacturing accounts for 41% of GDP (v. 17% in US)
- Over $600B in foreign direct investment since 1980s -- $63B in 2006 alone
Global Factory Floor

• Trade surplus in 2006 of $177.5B with the world and $232.5B with the US
• Starting in 2003 -- world’s largest producer of color TVs, refrigerators and washing machines, DVD players, cameras, cell phones, microwave ovens, toys and many other products
Global Factory Floor

- Over 50,000 US-based corporations have operations in China
- World Bank estimates that 55% of China’s exports to US are actually intra-company transfers from directly owned or contracted factories
Traditional Sports Shoe Production Hazards

- Scale of factories
- Chemical exposures
- Noise exposures
- Ergonomic hazards
- Machine guarding
- UV-RF radiation
- Organization of production
Organization of Production Hazards

• Long, long hours
  – Increased accidents
  – Irrelevance of OELs
• Intense rate of production
  – Carrot: pay based on quotas
  – Stick: close supervision
• High turn-over rates
  – Accidents
  – Training challenges
China Goes “Lean”

Global shift from “Fordist” organization:
- Replace massive, single-process dept
- Establish small production cells integrating various operations completed by a single team of workers
- Lean production cells often in “U” or “S” configuration
China Goes Lean

Example of sports shoe production:

– Eliminate separate departments for cutting, stitching, stock fit, assembly, inspection and packaging

– Replace with lean cells performing and completing all operations -- start with raw materials and end with boxed shoe
China Goes Lean

- All the traditional hazards remain
- Add new hazards through combining operations -- mixing previously separated exposures with additive and cumulative effects
- Increase ergo hazards and safety hazards related to moving machinery
Workers Participation

• Three key players in factory OHS
  – Government
  – Employers
  – Workers
Workers Participation

In effective OHS programs, workers play key roles in:

– Hazard recognition/inspections
– Accident investigation and prevention
– Worker training
Workers Participation

Under lean production in China --

- Giant factories
- Small mgmt EH&S committees
- Widespread hazards
- High employee turn-over rates
Workers Participation

Obstacles to real worker participation:

1) Lack of political will and/or lack of sufficient resources from executive management

2) “command and control” management approach -- no place for worker initiatives or leadership
Workers Participation

3) Opposition from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU)

4) Opposition from first line supervisors and department managers

5) Lack of worker volunteers concerned about pay, preparation, authority
Workers Participation

6) High employee turn-over rates

Overcoming these obstacles requires conscious policy decision by “brand” and plant managers, and sufficient human, financial and technical resources.
Workers Participation

Best example within shoe sector was Kong Tai Shoes (KTS) in Longguan

Keys to success:
1) Training of worker OHS committee members
2) Overlap with elected factory union committee
化学物质如何影响人体健康

头部：头晕、头痛

神经系统：紧张不安、易怒、失眠、颤抖

眼睛：发红、充血、眼皮肿、感觉眼睛有异物

鼻和喉：打喷嚏、咳嗽、喉咙疼痛

胸腔和肺：气喘、咳嗽、气短、肺癌

胃：恶心、呕吐、胃痛

皮肤：发红、干燥、出现皮疹、发痒、皮炎

生殖系统：男：精子数目少、损伤精子

女：月经不调、流产、对婴儿或胎儿造成损害
Workers Participation

Worker OHS Ctte Members at KTS:

1) Regular monthly inspections -- the fearsome “Red Hats”
2) Verification of hazard correction
3) Accident investigations
4) Peer training of co-workers
Workers Participation

KTS Worker Participation in the plant OHS Committee:

- August 2001 training
- September 2001 formation of “Red Hats”
- March 2002 follow-up visit
- Late 2002 - change in plant ownership
- 2003 Red Hats fade away….
Contact Information

Garrett Brown
Maquiladora Health & Safety Support Network
P.O. Box 124
Berkeley, CA 94701-0124
gdbrown@igc.org
510-558-1014