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Where There Are Few Unions: Health and Safety Education for Organizing in Export Zones

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The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh on April 24, 2013, was one of the world's deadliest industrial disasters. Killing over 1,100 garment workers, it set the stage for a renewed discussion about working conditions for the people who make the clothes Americans wear. Roughly 97% of the clothing sold in the US is made internationally, largely in export factories and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) scattered across the globe.¹ The dramatic expansion of these factories and EPZs in their various forms has occurred without an increased commitment on the part of manufacturers, producers, investors, or governments to workers' health and safety on the job.

This research brief reviews the growth and characteristics of EPZs and gives an in-depth introduction to a new educational tool, the *Workers' Guide to Health and Safety*, a book being published in spring 2014 by Hesperian Health Guides in Berkeley, California.² Its goal is to assist workers and their supporters in organizing safe workplaces in garment, shoe, and electronic factories and manufacturing zones internationally. Implicitly critiquing voluntary systems such as Codes of Conduct and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and their minimal achievements in improving worker health and safety, the book supports the position that the best guarantee of a safe workplace is an educated and empowered workforce. Using a popular education approach, prioritizing women workers' concerns, and building on workers' and organizers' experiences from the inception of the project, the *Workers' Guide* has the potential to be an important tool in ongoing organizing in export manufacturing.

Export Processing Zones: Work on the Globalized Assembly Line

Industrial export zones have become the tool-of-choice for the migration of consumer product manufacturing to developing countries, multiplying at a rapid rate and defying the boundaries that once defined the concept of export "zones." In 2003, the International Labour Office (ILO) described EPZs as "industrial zones with special incentives set up to attract foreign investors, in which imported materials undergo some degree of processing before being (re-) exported again." This con-

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¹ American Apparel & Footwear Association (2012, Oct. 19). Apparel Stats 2012. [Press release] Retrieved from: <https://www.wewear.org/aafa-releases-apparelstats-2012-report/>

² Hesperian Health Guides www.hesperian.org

cept has expanded to include high tech zones, finance zones, logistics centers, free ports, and even tourist resorts. But since the initial boom of EPZs in the 1980s and 90s, there have been increasing numbers of individual factories springing up outside the formal “borders” of EPZs that enjoy similarly privileged status.³ Setting aside the many uncounted individual factories, the number of export zones increased fourfold in the nine years between 1997 and 2006; by 2006 there were 3,500 formal EPZs located in at least 130 countries.⁴ Employment has tripled over the same period, with roughly 66 million employed in EPZs (40 million in China, 15 million in the rest of Asia, 5 million in Central America, 3 million in Bangladesh, etc). As early as 1995 Salvadoran President Armando Calderón Sol spelled out a development model for his country, saying he wanted to “turn all of El Salvador into one big free trade zone,” a statement that seems to have ongoing resonance in many parts of the world.⁵ As an extreme example of how this plays out on the local level, special benefits offered to factories in Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez EPZs include the tax-free provision of an array of infrastructure, facilities, and services – paid for by the taxes of local residents, some of the poorest people in North America.

Figure 1: Estimates of the development of export processing zones*

Years	1975	1986	1997	2002	2006
Number of countries with EPZs	25	47	93	116	130
Number of EPZs or similar types of zones	79	176	845	3 000	3 500
Employment: (millions)	n.a.	n.a.	22.5	43	66
– of which China	n.a.	n.a.	18	30	40
– of which other countries with figures available	0.8	1.9	4.5	13	26

*From the ILO database on export processing zones, http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2007/107B09_80_engl.pdf

Rana Plaza, while to date the largest, is only one of many workplace tragedies that take place every year in Bangladesh alone.⁶ Large-scale health, safety, and labor violations in export manufacturing often defy international conventions, manufacturers’ agreements with contractors, and labor and occupational safety and health (OSH) laws that may exist in any given country or region. This results in a devastating range of health

³ International Labour Office, Committee on Employment and Social Policy (2003, March). *Employment and social policy in respect of export processing zones (EPZs)* <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/gb/docs/gb286/pdf/esp-3.pdf>

⁴ Singa Boyenge, J. (2007, April). ILO database on export processing zones (Revised), Geneva: International Labour Office http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2007/107B09_80_engl.pdf

⁵ Robinson, W. (2003). *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change and Globalization*, London/Brooklyn: Verso <http://books.google.com/books?id=BXoiaRYVv1kC&pg=PA96&lpg=PA96&dq=Armando+Calder%C3%B3n+Sol+free+trade+zone&source=bl&ots=Xg46CwEttW&sig=IZKCsiCxKdLnjW01qVEWgVvZlNs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=uCwHUv7gEqS6yAGC9oHoAg&ved=0CDwQ6AEwBDgK#v=onepage&q=Armando%20Calder%C3%B3n%20Sol%20free%20trade%20zone&f=false>

⁶ Center for Research on Multi-national Corporations (SOMO) and Clean Clothes Campaign, (2013, March). *Fatal Fashion: Analysis of recent factory fires in Pakistan and Bangladesh* <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/fatal-fashion.pdf>

impacts, from workplace accidents to emotional and social problems. Among the 1,500,000 Bangladeshi garment workers, currently earning the lowest wage in the international garment trade (averaging 22 cents/hour),⁷ the Bangladesh Occupational, Safety, Health and Environmental Foundation reported that 356 were killed and 899 injured on the job during just the first six months of 2010.⁸ During this same period, 16 young workers attempted suicide at Foxconn Technology Group's plant in Longhua, China, where 70% of Apple's products are assembled –and at least 49 semiconductor workers contracted cancer in Samsung's Korean electronic plants.⁹ In the Philippines, official government reports show that 64% in 2003 (34,956 cases) and 55% in 2007 (26,284 cases) of all non-agricultural occupational disease takes place in manufacturing.¹⁰

The dramatic decline of manufacturing in the US has left California with the United States' largest manufacturing sector, roughly 1.2 million jobs; Los Angeles County accounts for just over half.¹¹ As in EPZs internationally, the top manufacturing sectors are computers/electronics (23% of the jobs) and apparel. LA County maintains the nation's largest garment industry with over 60,000 workers sewing in the legally registered factories alone; in inverse relation to the growth in garment manufacturing internationally, the number of employees in LA has shrunk to less than a third the size it was in the mid-1990s. Regardless, the face of LA's manufacturing resembles that of the international zones in that health, safety, and wage theft issues continue within apparel and other production.¹² In spite of strong health and safety standards in the US relative to those in many other countries, at least 4,600 workers in all fields of work—364 in California—died on the job in 2011 and approximately 5,000 more died from occupational diseases.¹³

The public dialogue following the Rana Plaza disaster picked up where it left off in the past, with the focus on increasing labor standards, manufacturers' accountability, monitoring, and enforcement in globalized manufacturing. But it has largely ignored the minimal success—or some would say outright failure—of this

⁷Yamagata, T. and Yunus, M. (2012). *The Garment Industry in Bangladesh*, in Fukunishi, T. ed. *Dynamics of the Garment Industry in Low-Income Countries: Experience of Asia and Africa* (Interim Report). Chousakenkyu Houkokusho, IDE-JETRO http://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Download/Report/2011/pdf/410_ch6.pdf

⁸ Brown, G. (2011, May). *Corporate Social Responsibility: What is it good for?*. ISHN Global Watch http://mhssn.igc.org/CSR_BangladeshFires_ISHN_May2011.pdf

⁹ Brown, G. (2010, August 4). *Global Electronics Factories in Spotlight*. Occupational Health & Safety Online, page 34. <http://ohsonline.com/Articles/2010/08/04/Global-Electronics-Factories-In-Spotlight.aspx?p=1>

¹⁰ Asia Monitor Resource Centre (2012). *Invisible Victims of Development: Workers Health and Safety in Asia*, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, Hong Kong.

¹¹ Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation and Kyser Center for Economic Research (2011). *Manufacturing: Still a Force in Southern California*. http://laedc.org/reports/Manufacturing_2011.pdf

¹² Milkman, R., Gonzales, A., & Narro, V. (2010). *Wage Theft and Workplace Violations in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. <http://www.labor.ucla.edu/publications/reports/LAWagetheft.pdf>
Market Watch (2013, April 11). *California Labor Commissioner Fines Garment Contractor for Wage Theft*. *Press statement*, New York: Wall Street Journal. <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/california-labor-commissioner-fines-garment-contractor-for-wage-theft-2013-04-11>;

State of California, Department of Industrial Relations (2013, June 18). *Labor Commissioner Cites Garment for Wage, Registration Violations*. *Press release* <http://www.dir.ca.gov/DIRNews/2013/IR2013-31.pdf>

¹³ WorkSafe (2013, April 28). *Dying at Work in California*. Oakland: WorkSafe. http://www.worksafe.org/2013/Dying_at_Work_in_CA_2013_web.pdf

approach over the last several decades.¹⁴ While some countries have OSH laws on the books that parallel those of the US and EU, they are rarely enforced in export zones and factories. Labor standards are suspended, ignored, or don't exist; corporate social responsibility monitoring agreements are easily overlooked; and enforcement is inadequately funded.

The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a post-Rana Plaza agreement involving international and Bangladeshi unions, NGOs, and 90 garment companies mainly from Europe, focuses on inspections and building repair, fire and building safety trainings, and paying the cost of Rana Plaza and future garment disasters. The much weaker Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety signed by 17 North American companies takes up similar terrain with less accountability and protection built in.¹⁵ While the Accord laid groundwork for worker participation in monitoring and safety committees, immediate concerns about wages and daily health and safety were not included. The walkouts in May and June, as well as the negative response in late September to protests by many thousands of garment workers demanding that wages be doubled, point to the dramatic gap between corporate economic interests and the exploitative conditions for Bangladeshi workers.¹⁶

Union Organizing and Export Zones

Organizing independent unions is extremely difficult in most free-trade nations.¹⁷ In at least six countries labor rights have been formally suspended within “zones.” And while Bangladesh technically stopped offering “no unions or strikes” as a non-financial “incentive” in EPZs in 2004, this practice still appears to be in place in some factories and zones.¹⁸ National unions in China, and many of those in Mexico and Vietnam, are closely tied to the government, and in many places factories establish “company unions” to substitute for legitimate worker representation. In addition, the common practice of contract hiring and outright targeting of union organizers in some countries creates a tenuous and tense environment for labor organizing.

¹⁴ Ali Manik, J., Yardley, J., & Greenhouse, S. (2013, April 26). *Bangladeshis Burn Factory to Protest Unsafe Conditions*. New York: New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/27/world/asia/bangladesh-building-collapse.html>

Locke, R. & Romis, M. (2006, August) *Beyond Corporate Codes of Conduct*, Cambridge: Sloan School of Management, MIT, Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative - Working Paper No. 26; http://www.hks.harvard.edu/m-rcbg/CSRI/publications/workingpaper_26_Locke_Romis.pdf;

¹⁵ Wohl, J. & Palmer, D. (2013, July 10). *North American group sets Bangladesh factory safety plan*, New York, Reuters <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/10/us-bangladesh-factories-northamerica-idUSBRE9690IR20130710>, Clean Clothes Campaign (2013). *Executive Summary of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh*. <http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/background/in-short-the-bangladesh-safety-accord>

¹⁶ Devnath, A. (2013, Sept. 24) *Bangladesh Garment Protests Enter a Fourth Day as factories Open*. New York: Bloomberg Businessweek, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2013-09-23/two-hundred-bangladesh-apparel-factories-shut-on-labor-unrest>

¹⁷ Holdcroft, J. *Creating conditions for collective labour relations to improve labour rights in the electronics industry*. Geneva: International Metalworkers Federation. http://www.ilera-directory.org/15thworldcongress/files/papers/Track_2/Poster/CS1W_45_HOLDCROFT.pdf

¹⁸ Gaffney, A.W. (2013, August 8). *Life and Death at Work: Labor and Occupational Health After Rana Plaza*, Truth-out.org. <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/18200-life-and-death-at-work-labor-and-occupational-health-after-rana-plaza>
Asia Monitor Resource Center (2003). *Workers' Rights for the New Century*. Hong Kong: AMRC <http://www.amrc.org.hk/system/files/Labour%20Law%20Review%202003%20Contents%20and%20Intro.pdf>

Several recent examples illustrate how unions are playing an important role in ensuring workplace health and safety in export manufacturing, particularly where strong labor laws exist and are enforced, where unions are committed to OSH, and where members are active in the process. As rare as this confluence is for workers in export jobs, Foxconn's new factories in Brazil (built in 2012) point to one set of possibilities. Their factories comply with the country's strict labor laws and their employees, members of the Metalworkers Union of Jundiai, earn twice the wages of their Chinese counterparts, participate on worker/management safety committees, and receive maternity leave, paid month-long vacations, and other significant benefits.¹⁹ A very different union situation exists in the Free Trade Zones on Batam, one of Indonesia's Riau Islands, where some of the world's only unionized electronics workers are members of FSPMI (Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers - affiliated with the International Metal Workers Union/IMF) and Lomenik SBSI.²⁰ FSPMI has increasingly focused on OSH, bringing their Organizing Road Show to community settings where education, dialogue, and, sometimes, fun converge.²¹ Additionally, acknowledging that the gender gap between union leaders and the largely female workforce has been one of the most serious obstacles to organizing in EPZs, a Women's Forum was established and the number of women at all levels of the union has increased.²² In 2008, IMF claimed that FSPMI and Lomenik have been their most successful affiliates at organizing EPZ workers internationally.

These rare examples aside, questions arise given the reality for the majority of export workers: What role can workers themselves—and their supporters—play in altering this landscape, particularly when unions and structures for organizing are few? What kinds of organizing structures can encourage and assist their goals? What tools can support them in their efforts? These are the questions at the heart of the *Workers' Guide*.

Laying the Groundwork for the Workers' Guide

In 2000, Garrett Brown, coordinator of the Maquiladora Health & Safety Support Network (MHSSN), asked the Hesperian Foundation (now Hesperian Health Guides) to develop a book that could be used by workers and organizers in garment, shoe, and electronics manufacturing around the world. Meant to extend the capacity of organizers and put a new tool directly in the hands of workers, the project's goals are two-fold: to support

¹⁹ Greene, J. (2012, April 11). *Could Foxconn's factory in Brazil be a model for Apple production?* c/net. http://news.cnet.com/8301-13579_3-57412330-37/could-foxconns-factory-in-brazil-be-a-model-for-apple-production/; The Economic Policy Institute hosted a forum (April 2012) evaluating Foxconn's factories in China and comparing them with the Brazilian model: <http://www.epi.org/event/apple-foxconn-labor-practices-china/>

²⁰ Wulandari, S. (2012) *Batam Free Trade Zone*, Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Resource Center <http://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/17433173/batam-free-trade-zonepdf-asia-monitor-resource-center>

²¹ Grossman, E. (2010, Oct. 29). *Electronics production in Batam, Indonesia*. Charlottesville, VA: Advancing Green Chemistry. <http://advancinggreenchemistry.org/electronics-production-in-batam-indonesia-osh-is-the-most-important-if-we-are-sick-we-cannot-earn-our-salaries/> ;

Wulandari, S <http://www.amrc.org.hk/system/files/Batam%20Free%20Trade%20Zone.pdf>;

Peter, K. (2008, Sept. 4). *Organizing Precarious Workers in Indonesia*. Geneva: International Metalworkers Federation <http://www.imfmetal.org/index.cfm?c=18178&l=2>

International Metalworkers Federation (2009, June 14). *Union Roadshow: EPZ Organizing* (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3D3s7vJpjl>

²² Holdcroft, J. (2008). *Organising the hi-tech ghettos of globalization* in "International Journal of Labour Research", Vol.1,1. Geneva: ILO

immediate action for health on the job and encourage long-term sustainable change. Written in close dialogue with workers and grassroots groups internationally, its upcoming release will illuminate the daily realities inside export manufacturing.

For almost forty years, Hesperian has been known for creating simply-written medical manuals, filled with illustrations, that enable ordinary people to diagnose, treat and prevent common health problems, and to understand and organize to address the underlying causes of poor health—including poverty, discrimination, and unjust social structures. The guides present a range of relevant, sometimes controversial, issues head-on in direct, inclusive language and images.

The success of Hesperian's past projects point to possible opportunities for the *Workers' Guide*. Hesperian's first and best-known publication, "Donde No Hay Doctor," later translated as "Where There Is No Doctor" (WTND), was developed out of a village-run health project in Mexico's Sierra Madre during the early 1970s. It was published as a book in 1973 largely for use in rural areas. Insisting that ordinary people could not safely put such technical information to good use, much of the medical establishment initially gave it a chilly reception. Since then, WTND has gradually become an essential source of health care information; translated into more than 80 languages and used in over 100 countries, it has been described by the World Health Organization as "arguably the most widely-used public health manual in the world." An evaluation of WTND's distribution, use, and effectiveness revealed that each book sold or donated reaches and positively impacts between 44 and 65 people, and that people at the most grassroots levels learn the most from the guides and use and share the information most often. In addition to physically passing books on to others, the 358 respondents from across the globe reported sharing the book through informal conversations (75%), reading it to others (50%), and storytelling or play-acting (27%).²³

"I am happy to [say].... that with the donated [WTND] book our association has been turned into an active health Education movement with over 30 adult members attending daily, three quarters of whom are women and girls and the rest are men. Our reading tent is now... open for six hours from Monday to Sunday from twelve noon to six in the evening. We have made it a village Health Library... and our activities are now known far and wide. We have moved a step further and we are now inviting health specialists to come and talk to us on diversified issues." Kenya, 2000

Partner organizations and other participants in the WTND evaluation listed a number of additional materials they drew from over the years to support their community health work, primarily highly-technical medical books and textbooks and seven of Hesperian's other guides. When it comes to health and safety, the digital age makes OSH materials widely available, from the immense online archives of the ILO to government and union websites to the many dynamic organizations who focus on workplace health and safety on the local, national, and international levels. But overall, sorting through the materials to find those that are relevant to garment, shoe, and electronics work can be a difficult task. Most training materials are too technical and few are

²³ Davis, K., Liut, J., Reichner, D. & Eng Warshaw, J. (2007), *Evaluation of "Where There Is No Doctor,"* Capstone Project, New York University Wagner School of Public Health.

developed with popular education in mind.²⁴ The *Workers' Guide*, like Hesperian's other books, pulls together in a popular education format a large quantity of relevant information that, in this case, addresses the needs of rapidly expanding communities of workers.

The difference between remote rural communities and bustling export manufacturing zones is dramatic, but the reality that there are many parts of the world where a doctor will still never arrive to remedy health issues has its equivalent in the *Workers' Guide*: what can be done in manufacturing facilities where there are no health and safety or union officials to ensure safe working conditions on the job?

The Workers' Guide: Participatory Education for Empowerment

Hesperian has worked to ensure that workers' personal experiences and stories are central in the *Workers' Guide*. Field review is the cornerstone of Hesperian's book development method and their work depends on the grassroots groups who partner with them in that process. In a complex feedback loop, draft chapters and related materials are translated by partner organizations and utilized as core training material in workplaces and community venues—or read aloud to worker-participants in on-the-spot translation. The participants, whether literate or not, are both building their own knowledge and providing important feedback to the editors on the material's subject matter and presentation. Workers themselves become a key source of knowledge, shaping the content and most effective educational style for their own use and for others with similar experiences.

"As you know, Christmas and New Year are coming. Many workers suffer from heavy overtime work... However, we still get positive feedback from them as many workers are interested in the materials. They are eager to share their own stories as well as learn [of] the workers' situation in other countries. Also, they are excited that their feedback is useful and might become a tool for workers all around the world."
- Chinese Working Women's Network

To date Hesperian has collaborated with 40 partner organizations in the US and internationally in field testing the *Workers' Guide*. Partners are primarily members of the networks of activist, faith-based, and workers' groups that take the lead in supporting workers in export factories. Chapters have been translated and tested in work environments by LION in Indonesia, Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) in Hong Kong, The Institute for Occupational Health and Safety Development (IOHSAD) in the Philippines, Labor Action China, the Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles, and groups in Mexico among many others.

"Participation has also benefited our ongoing work...we have used our involvement in the community review to augment the leadership development of workers within the Center. During the community review of the English draft, two workers facilitated a risk mapping exercise, building both their skills and their confidence as leaders." - Garment Worker Center, Los Angeles

Hesperian's work and the work of many of their partners have drawn on and contributed to the popular education movement that approaches participatory, critical, and reflective health education as a tool for

²⁴ Interesting source lists for grassroots training include <http://www.hazards.org/diyresearch/index.htm> and <http://www.coshnetwork.org/node/15> ; UCLA-LOSH materials: <http://www.losh.ucla.edu/losh/resources-publications/fact-sheets.html>

empowerment and action. The *Workers' Guide* provides information, stories, and suggestions for action that leave room for, and in fact will rely on, participants' engagement, personal experiences, and critical thinking to identify and flesh out their own specific problems, solutions, and strategies for change. Issues that might be considered controversial such as gender equity, a major concern for the largely female workforce, are more easily accepted in open dialogue about workplace issues using this approach.

"The 'Calculate your pay' activity was very beneficial for the women workers... Before doing this some of [them] had the idea that they were earning well or at least what was fair, but after doing the exercise they discovered that they were not getting some overtime hours and bonuses. Besides realizing the importance of knowing how much you get paid, we talked about the importance of keeping records/documents in case they need to confront the boss or, in the case of being fired, to take as evidence in the labor court." – Colectivo de Trabajadoras Insumisas, Mexico

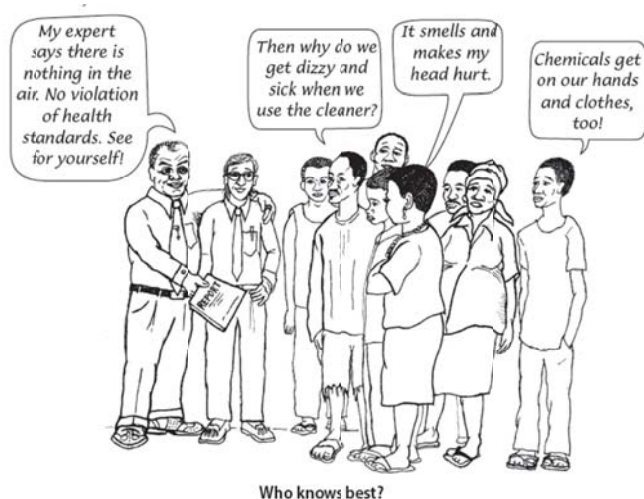


Figure 2: Illustration on Chemical Hazards

groups of workers in dialogue; the "discussions" explore working conditions and their impact on workers lives, and model the kind of questions and conversations that might be useful in exploring specific health and safety issues in workplace and community settings.

During the many years of developing their diverse health guides, Hesperian has evolved an overall pedagogical methodology and a visual style that serve as a basic template for guides on different health topics in widely divergent settings. While used at every level of the health care chain, their work is aimed particularly at wide use in grassroots settings. The writing in *the Workers' Guide* reflects their experience that clear, forthright language is the most effective way to make a point and start a dialogue – and that stories can be a powerful source of learning. The hand-drawn illustrations provide an additional opportunity to engage participants, whether able to read or not. Many feature

The *Guide* includes other identifiable elements that repeat throughout the book, including: **Story boxes** about the experiences of individuals and groups of workers and community solutions to workplace problems; **Problem-solving and learning activities**, such as "Examine Your Pay," "Facing Fear Together," and "An Emergency Plan for Your Factory;" **Reminders** that help the reader-participant identify key issues to consider as they learn to keep an "exposure notebook" documenting unsafe conditions; **"How-to" boxes** that show tangible things workers can do for themselves, such as "How to make a seat cushion" and "How to read an MSDS sheet;" and **Summaries of UN and ILO conventions** that relate to topics in the *Guide*, for example: "The Rights of Migrant Workers," "Children and Work," and "The Right to Know About Chemicals."

Work Hazards and Social Hazards

The *Workers' Guide* is organized into two main sections: **Work Hazards** and **Social Hazards**. **Work Hazards** includes chapters on the health and safety hazards specific to working in electronics, garment, and shoe factories, including chemical, ergonomic, and other common issues. It also presents solutions and strategies to mitigate and prevent these hazards when possible. The use of and risks associated with use of chemicals in the workplace are major issues that both workers and Hesperian's partners wanted to see addressed in this book. Chemicals that are banned or limited by law in the US and EU, such as benzene, may be commonly used in production processes in export factories. For the first time Hesperian has taken on the complex challenge of writing about workplace chemicals within the context of their commitment to participatory learning.

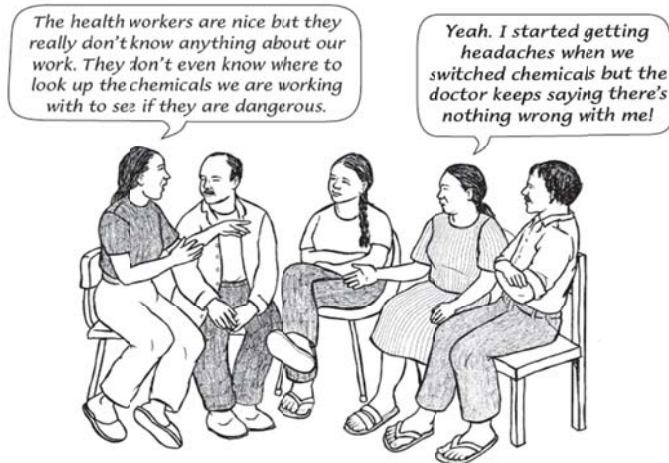


Figure 3: Illustration on Access to Healthcare

Specific to this book is the development of a unique set of chemical charts for chemicals commonly used in garment, shoe and electronics manufacturing, and meant to be put specifically in the hands of workers and organizers in those workplaces. These are an alternative to the traditional MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheets) that are required wherever chemicals are used and are generally intended to provide medical providers, emergency responders, and workers with a great deal of information about chemicals in the workplace, how to safely work with the substance, and potential hazards. But traditional MSDSs are not uniform; each country, industry, agency, and even locality may have different formats and required content, and workers also contend with varying formulations of the same chemical or chemical mixture. On the international level, a long-term effort to standardize, or “harmonize,” the chemical information on MSDS is reaching its final stages. There are many organizations and entities concerned that the harmonization not lower the higher standards some countries and states currently have and the ILO has outlined 17 widely-used categories of information that should be included in a standard MSDS.²⁵ But, at the grassroots level, these categories do not always respond to workers’ most urgent questions about safety on the job – and the traditional MSDS can be overwhelming and hard to understand. When the Federation of Indonesian Metal Workers wanted to figure out the impacts of specific chemicals on their members in electronics factories they had to obtain and decode the relevant MSDS for their own use; the *Workers' Guide* will make this information available to workers and supporters in one place in an accessible format. The questions each *Workers' Guide* chemical chart responds to are: What are the

²⁵ International Labour Organization. *Chemical Safety Training Modules*. Chapter 4: Chemical Safety Cards. Geneva: ILO <http://www.ilo.org/legacy/english/protection/safework/cis/products/safetytm/msds.htm>; Occupational Safety & Health Administration (2013). *A Guide to The Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals (GHS)*. Washington DC: United States Department of Labor. <https://www.osha.gov/dsg/hazcom/ghs.html#1.1>

specific chemicals in your workplace? Do you use them? What happens when they come in contact with your body? What happens if you are exposed over time? What should you do if you are at risk of exposure?

The challenge for Hesperian in balancing accessibility, usefulness, and critical information in creating their chemical charts is illustrated by the evolution of their format in response to feedback during field testing. Starting with only six simplified informational categories for every one of the chemicals, the participant testing indicated that this information was too simple and didn't contextualize the chemicals adequately. So Hesperian revised the format; the final version uses seven possible symbols at the top of the chart, all relating to the level and types of hazards workers will encounter, along with clear information responding to the five questions above. The chemicals were regrouped into eighteen "families," each used in a particular area of work (Acid Wash Chemicals, Dyes, Flame Retardants, Mercapto-based rubber accelerators, Metals, etc.), enabling the reader to understand the larger context for a particular chemical. The introductory page to each chemical "family" gives an overview and tells how to prevent or reduce exposure. Information about clean-up, decontamination, and related mitigation and safety measures is found in greater detail than a standard MSDS at the very beginning of this section of the book. (For a comparison of the original chemical chart and the revised, more detailed version, see Appendix I).

Conflicting attitudes about mitigation, harm reduction, and how to address personal protective equipment (PPE – i.e., gloves, masks, and other equipment meant to protect workers from particular hazards) in the *Guide* emerged as part of the participatory development process. Many activists think deadly and highly-toxic chemicals should be banned, rather than "mitigated" through measures that may or may not safely remedy the problem—hi or may rely almost completely on impossibly rigid personal diligence to assure safety. In addition, generic images of PPE (gloves, masks, etc.) on MSDS can be misleading since different chemicals often require different kinds of gloves and masks as safety measures—and the difference can be a matter of life or death. The final chemical sheets in the *Workers' Guide* do not include images of gloves or masks, but lists the specific item to use and cross-references to a detailed section on the different types of PPE.

Labour Action China and the Ban Benzene Campaign

The ongoing use of benzene in export zones presents a real-life situation where the *Workers' Guide* can be useful. Benzene, among the most poisonous chemicals used in manufacturing, is banned in the US and EU in the production of electronics and tightly controlled as an additive to gasoline and other products; nonetheless it is still found in export manufacturing. In China, official labor reports indicate that poisoning from lead, benzene, and arsenic is the second most common workplace disease following silicosis.²⁶ ANROEV (Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational and Environmental Victims) reports that in the city of Dongguan, with its 800-plus electronics factories, 30% of all diagnosed occupational diseases are caused by benzene poisoning. Disregarding worker health and safety, electronics producers, facing restrictions in the US and EU, focus on limiting dangerous chemicals such as benzene in the actual products placed in the consumer market. But they rarely ban the use of these same chemicals in the production process. While the substances are technically prohibited by

²⁶ Clean Clothes Campaign, IHLO, SACOM, War On Want (2013). *Breathless For Blue Jeans: Health hazards in China's denim factories*. London: War On Want.

some companies (such as Adidas and Puma) in their production guidelines for suppliers, contractors often ignore these agreements and compliance is rarely monitored. Apple, HP, and Samsung do not mention benzene in substance guidelines for their suppliers.²⁷

The recent launch of Labour Action China's (LAC) Ban Benzene Campaign is rooted in their long-term work supporting workers' organizing and those who suffer workplace injuries in the sprawling Pearl River Delta Economic Zone. Over the past several years, they noticed more and more cases of chemical poisoning and, during the last year, started organizing these workers and documenting their stories. It became clear that the large majority were victims of benzene poisoning. In addition to teaching affected individuals and groups of workers how to file claims after employers refused to pay for medical care and disability, they began discussing a campaign to ban benzene. Together with 52 affected workers, and the support of ANROEV and NGOs working in the area, LAC launched a Ban Benzene Campaign in July 2013, the 40th anniversary of ILO's Benzene Convention (C136). Their two main goals are to ensure that local factories and governments end the use of benzene and to pressure the Chinese government to sign onto the Convention and eventually establish a national ban.²⁸ As the benzene campaign began, LAC used draft chemical information from the *Workers' Guide* and agreed to provide feedback from workers and community members. It appears very likely that the *Workers' Guide* can support this organizing project and other projects like it, and that the *Guide* will be carried into new communities as organizing spreads.

Social Hazards

The **Social Hazards** section uses a strong gender lens to focus on the social context in which workers live and work. Because at least 80% of the employees in EPZ factories are women, the *Workers' Guide* recognizes their



Figure 4: Illustration on Factory Pollution

experiences as the norm rather than the exception. While many occupational health and safety programs still do not include social hazards in their mission, numerous interviews and discussions with workers conducted by Hesperian's partners have indicated that these issues are often most pressing on a day-to-day basis. These chapters include topics such as doing factory work at home, violence and sexual harassment, discrimination, staying healthy, reproductive and sexual health, fair wages, stress and mental health, industrial pollution, and working children—all issues that affect the quality of workplace and community life. Because of the nature

²⁷ Ban Benzene Campaign Q & A (2013). New Delhi: Asian Network for the Rights Of Occupational and Environmental Victims <http://www.anroev.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Ban-benzene-Campaign.pdf>

²⁸ Email exchange with Labour Action China organizers, August 2013; Ban Benzene Campaign (2013)

<http://banbenzenecampaign.weebly.com/> ;

War On Want (2013). *Labour Action China: Case Study* <http://www.waronwant.org/overseas-work/sweatshops-and-plantations/16780-labour-action-china-case-study>

of problems faced by workers, solutions to social hazards are as often found outside the factory as within.

The *Guide* takes as a given that the best guarantee of workplace safety and health is an educated workforce who can themselves enforce OSH standards. The training of **promoters** to educate about and document health and safety issues in workplaces and communities may be one of the most effective strategies the *Workers' Guide* presents to link the workplace and rights-based health organizing. In the standard definition, a promoter (*promotora* in Spanish) is a community member who is trained to provide peer-to-peer outreach and health education in communities which have little or no access to health services. The use of promoters has become a more common and important component of health outreach and education in disparate programs around the world, including the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union of 1.3 million poor, self-employed women workers in India, which uses promoters to educate its own members in some rural areas, and Cal-OSHA's heat illness prevention program in Southern California.²⁹ While promoters have traditionally been seen as health workers in community settings, the *Workers' Guide* can help broaden the definition of health to include work-related impacts. It can also help familiarize community promoters with workplace issues that carry over to home and community life. On the other hand, the *Guide* can also support the development of worker educators/promoters within factories who are trained to understand health in the context of living and working in manufacturing zones.

A simple story in the *Guide's* section on "Taking action for better health care" illustrates the Chinese Working Women's Network's (CWWN) inclusion of promoters on one of their projects. CWWN, originally formed of migrant women factory workers in Guangdong Province, today organizes throughout Hong Kong and southern China's export zones.³⁰

"CWWN started the Women's Health Express, a mobile van that stops outside factories in the Pearl River Delta industrial zone. Women who visit the van are checked for signs of many illnesses and given general health information and treatment, as well as information about health problems caused by dangers at work. Staffed by women health promoters, the Women's Health Express is a place where women workers feel comfortable talking about their concerns and problems."³¹

Organizational structures that support grassroots health and safety

In addition to **promoters**, the *Workers' Guide* integrates a number of forms of organization that support grassroots health and safety education and organizing: **workplace health and safety committees; workers partnering with community allies**, including CBOs, faith-based groups, and worker centers; **unionization of factory workers and working with unions**; and **multi-level campaigns that include all these groups as well as international CBOs and institutions** in different combinations.

²⁹ Riley, K., Delp, L., Cornelio, D., and Jacobs, S. (2012) *From Agricultural Fields To Urban Asphalt: The Role Of Worker Education To Promote California's Heat Illness Prevention Standard*, New Solutions, Vol. 22(3) 297-323.

³⁰ Ngai, P. & Lie Ming, Y. (2004, November-December). *The Chinese Working Women's Network*. Detroit: Against The Current, 113 <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/1126>

³¹ From *Workers' Guide*, Chapter 14, Staying Healthy

These “structures” and how they extend into the factory and community are presented throughout the book in numerous stories about the creative organizing that has been taking place at the grassroots level, often told in first person from one or more workers’ perspective. **Workplace health and safety committees** are shown as spaces where workers strategize about ways to reduce stress, stay healthy, and deal directly with workplace hazards. Stories about the **importance of labor/community alliances** include those about Thai workers getting support from the Hope Workers’ Center after demanding payment of overtime and illegal deductions owed them and encountering violence; and how a campaign for higher wages came out of an economic literacy training the Comité Fronterizo de Obreros presented to workers from a Mexican TV factory. **Unions** play a role in many stories: in one, an open discussion at a union meeting about sexual harassment by fellow workers results in a commitment to support women workers in ending this practice in the factory; and in another a Sri Lankan union helps identify ways the community can be made safer for women and facilitates their accomplishing these goals. **Broad cross-border campaigns** are seen in a Guatemalan campaign to stop forced overtime in two garment factories, where workers organize a union and then work with the union and national and international groups to pressure the government to respond to their complaints.

Combined in numerous ways, these “structures” are essential building blocks to organizing strategies in export zones. Cross-border campaigns in Philippine and Sri Lankan EPZs examined in other publications provide creative examples of structures and networks that expand to a global scale while maintaining focus on grassroots leadership and needs.³² These stories and the *Workers’ Guide* both emphasize the same point: that education is central—at every level of the solidarity chain.

What will “success” mean for the *Workers’ Guide*? And will the book be able to support health and safety organizing as hoped? In terms of having a broad reach, the best predictor for its success may lie in Hesperian’s diverse network and the proven multiplier effect of their prior books. The *Workers’ Guide* may not have as broad an audience as a medical manual that can be used by almost anyone (WTND), but the growth of EPZs and the migrant nature of life in many export areas indicate that the varied impacts of export factory work will be felt far beyond formal EPZ borders. Workers crossing their own countries and sometimes oceans to find employment may carry information from the *Guide* with them. In its development phase, the *Guide* has already supported grassroots education and the benzene campaign, and stories within the book itself highlight the kinds of situations in which the book can be used. From the impromptu fashion show staged in a factory to showcase needed protective equipment to an international solidarity campaign, the *Guide* will offer new ideas and encouragement to workers and their supporters.

Conclusion

The day before the Rana Plaza collapse, workers, aware that that the massive structure was unsafe, left work and walked out of the building. But under threat of losing their jobs they returned to the factories—and many lost their lives. This is a stark symbol of the reality in which workers and organizers in export factories find

³² McKay, S. (2006). *The Squeaky Wheel's Dilemma: New Forms of Labor Organizing in the Philippines*. Labor Studies Journal 30:41;

Brofenbrenner, K. (2007). *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital Through Cross-Border Campaigns*, Ithaca NY: ILR Press (Chapter 4 by Samanthi Gunawardana and Conclusion)

themselves. Hazardous and stressful working conditions can be a powerful motivation for workers' organization; this is increasingly evident as globalized production proliferates and workers experience the results.

But how likely is it that workers will take the risk and pressure their employers for a more costly ventilation system or replacement chemicals? Popular education tools such as the *Workers' Guide* are one important piece of a complex puzzle; worker-centered materials are invaluable, but will be most effective within a multi-pronged movement that supports workers' ongoing activism and involvement at all levels of the chain.³³ Hesperian's popular education approach, broad-based networks, and certainty that the numbers of export workers are growing in many parts of the world, suggest that the *Workers' Guide* has the potential to be an important and widely used tool in grassroots health and safety organizing in the coming years.

This brief utilized draft copies of the Workers' Guide (a few draft chapters are available at <http://hesperian.org/books-and-resources/> - Advance chapters to Workers' Guide to Health and Safety) and benefitted from discussions with: Todd Jailer, co-author of Workers' Guide to Health and Safety and Managing Editor at Hesperian Health Guides; Garrett Brown, Coordinator of the Maquila Health & Safety Support Network; and Ted Smith, Coordinator of the International Campaign for Responsible Technology.

³³ Delp, L. (2002). Building a Worker Health and Safety Movement, in Delp L., Outman-Kramer, M., Schurman, S., & Wong, K., ed, *Teaching for Change: Popular Education and the Labor Movement*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, Silver Spring, MD: George Meany Center for Labor Studies.

Appendix I

Original Benzene Chemical Chart

benzene		CAS# 71-43-2	
Other names: benzol, phenylhydride			
Uses: solvent			
	Red, itchy, dry, or cracked skin.		Watery, red eyes. Itchy, dry nose and throat.
			Headache, nausea, confusion, feel weak or dizzy.
	Harms brain. Harms blood cells, causes weak blood (anemia).		Harms baby during pregnancy.
			Cancer of the blood (leukemia) and other cancers.
	Catches fire easily. More poisonous than most other solvents. Easily absorbed through skin. See 'Solvents' on page xx.		

Revised Benzene Chemical Chart

Aromatic Hydrocarbon Solvents	
 Benzene – CAS No. 71-43-2	  
 Styrene – CAS No. 100-42-5	  
Toluene – CAS No. 108-88-3	  
Xylene – CAS No. 1330-20-7	  
What are they? Aromatic hydrocarbon solvents are clear, colorless to light yellow liquids that have sweet odors.	Do you work with them? Aromatic hydrocarbon solvents are found in garment, shoes, and electronics. Toluene is a common additive for glues in shoe factories and styrene is found in resins that reinforce plastics in electronics.
When they come in contact with your body: Skin: They irritate your skin and lead to dermatitis, which results in skin rash, dryness, redness and a burning feeling. Benzene can cause blisters. See First Aid on page xx. Eyes: They irritate your eyes. Benzene can make you blind. See First Aid on page xx. Nose/Lungs: The fumes can irritate your nose and throat, causing coughing and wheezing. Breathing the vapors can cause headaches, drowsiness, dizziness, confusion, nausea, weakness, and loss of consciousness. Benzene can cause bronchitis, lung edema, and pneumonia. It can cause problems with the heart. Breathing a lot of benzene (20,000 ppm) can kill you in 10 to 15 minutes. Toluene affects the nervous system, causing difficulty thinking, slow reflexes, dilated pupils, anxiety, and weakness. See First Aid on page xx. Mouth/Belly: Benzene and xylene can cause nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. Benzene can cause rapid heart rate, difficulty breathing, chest tightness, and respiratory failure, all of which can be fatal. See First Aid on page xx and seek medical attention if you ingest it.	
When you are exposed over time: All aromatic hydrocarbons can damage your liver, kidneys, brain and the nervous system. Benzene can cause problems with the blood and destroy blood cells. This can cause aplastic anemia. It may cause birth defects. It can cause leukemia (cancer of the blood). Styrene may cause birth defects and other reproductive health problems. It may cause lung cancer. Toluene may cause birth defects. Xylene may cause birth defects. It may cause cancer. Higher exposures can cause coma.	

Continued on the next page

Aromatic Hydrocarbon Solvents (continued from previous page)

If you are at risk of exposure:

Use polyvinyl alcohol (PVA), silver shield, or viton gloves. If you work with aromatic hydrocarbons as liquids, use indirect vent, impact- and splash-resistant goggles. If you are exposed to fumes, gas or vapor forms of these solvents, use non-vented, impact-resistant goggles (see Protective Equipment on page xx).

Use a respirator that can filter solvents (see Respirators on page xx).

Safer substitutes:

Toluene has been used as a safer alternative to benzene. However, toluene is still toxic.

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