

## Contesting Health and Safety on the Terrain of Participatory Ergonomics: A Case Study from the Manufacturing Sector

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Workplace health and safety in Canada is grounded in the Internal Responsibility System (IRS). The main means of implementing the IRS has been through Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC's). Analyses of the effectiveness of JHSC's indicate qualified support, while also stressing that health and safety remains "contested terrain", which cannot be divorced from the structural tensions of labour-management relations. Another approach to health and safety, also grounded in the IRS, is participatory ergonomics (PE).

In this paper, we examine the implementation of a PE program in a medium sized, unionized auto parts manufacturing plant. An Ergonomic Change team (ECT), comprised of representatives of both labour and management, paralleled the JHSC in structure, though the focus was on reducing musculoskeletal injuries. Data collection involved on-site observation and interviews. The specific focus of this presentation is the contested nature of the PE process.

We begin by locating the initiation of the ECT's work in the context of historically fractious labour relations in the plant. Labour relations were seen to show up as health and safety issues and vice versa. We then examine the negotiations that occurred over workers' involvement in the process, given the pressures on production in a plant which management described as struggling for survival. To complement the formal processes of hazard recognition and solution development, workers' ECT representatives made considerable efforts to promote ways of drawing on shop-floor workers' knowledge to improve ergonomics in the plant. The extent to which the PE process was "about ergonomics" or "about jobs" was debated by ECT members. Another source of conflict arose from a decision by plant management to by pass the ECT to make production changes, thus calling into question management commitment to a participatory process.

Our analysis emphasizes the several ways in which the ECT process was contested, and the location of many of the contentious issues in the context of labour management relations, in a context where production issues remain paramount.