



HEALTH AND SAFETY IN TRANSIT VEHICLE MAINTENANCE A FACTSHEET FOR LOCAL UNIONS

The vehicle maintenance work environment can be dirty, noisy and dangerous. The tools, equipment, materials and work activities demand planning, care and attention to stay safe and healthy. Risks range from skin irritation to chronic diseases and even fatal injury. These are all caused by conditions that can be improved.

Injuries from trips and falls are the most frequently reported problems, followed by overexertion and being struck by objects. These are caused by working conditions and by the pace of work. Some conditions have gotten better over the years, for example air quality in bus barns. But the effects of past exposures remain. Cancer can develop years after working around diesel exhaust or asbestos. The effect of noise does not go away, but as time passes people may think that age is the cause.

A study of transit union members has shown that health effects of transit maintenance work may be long lasting. Retired transit workers were more likely to have high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and arthritis, compared to the US blue-collar workforce at similar ages. Emphysema was more common in bus maintainers who had never smoked than in other non-smokers. Subway car maintainers reported more arthritis than expected.

Examples of Hazards in Transit Maintenance Work:

Strain, pain and musculoskeletal problems caused by forceful work, difficult postures and equipment

- ❖ Back, shoulder strains and tears from heavy work
- ❖ Osteoarthritis in the knee, hip, ankle from kneeling and bending
- ❖ Hand strain and nerve damage from tools that vibrate, are dull or badly designed

Noise-related hearing loss from vehicle or tool noise

Burns and fatal heart failure from electrical hazards

Serious falls when working on elevated surfaces without fall protection.

Injuries from slips, trips and falls because of oily or uneven surfaces, crowding and bad housekeeping

Diseases from chemicals

- ❖ Cancer or heart problems from diesel exhaust
- ❖ Liver problems from solvents and cleaners
- ❖ Cancer or lung damage from asbestos
- ❖ Nervous system damage from lead
- ❖ Dermatitis (skin disease) from many substances

Sleep problems and other stress disorders from schedules, working nights, low pay or long hours

Transit maintenance workers have the right to

A clean, safe and healthy workplace

Training on safe work practices

Training on health effects and safe use of chemicals

Tools and equipment to work safely with electricity and other hazards

Noise at safe levels and a hearing conservation program if not

Access to restrooms

No retaliation, discipline, or threats for raising safety and health concerns

Clean air, and air quality monitoring if sources such as diesel, paint, carbon monoxide or lead

Treatment for work-related injuries and illnesses, and lost time pay (if in state law or contract)

What can the Union do to win and enforce these rights?

Employers are responsible for cleaning up the work environment and preventing problems. But it takes union action, using workers' knowledge and skills, to get things done.

The first step is for the Local Union to identify and document where problems are occurring. The next step is bringing the problems to management. You may already participate in regular joint labor-management inspections of the workplace. This joint process is the best way to identify and correct problems. Weekly or monthly meetings help keep on top of work conditions. The inspection team or safety committee can investigate solutions and track whether things get better, stay the same or even continue to get worse. The union health and safety team should have skills and knowledge to find the problems and confirm that management's responses are adequate. But is it the employers' job to get things done.

Members support the process by reporting problems and by sticking together to achieve safe and healthy conditions. Knowledge and training for union officers and for members are important. Union strategies keep everyone involved – meetings, articles, buttons and communication. Local COSH groups (Committees on Occupational Safety and Health), occupational clinics, or Central Labor Councils can help with training, screening and health advice if needed. Some Local Unions have negotiated contract language establishing the right to participate in finding and fixing hazards, without retaliation.

The International Union can provide training to develop local skills on safety committees, building internal union strength, contract language and specific hazards.

What are the obstacles?

- Employers may not want to spend the time and money needed to keep all workers safe.
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations only cover public sector workers in 25 states, so enforcement may be difficult.
- Local Unions may not yet have the knowledge, skills or time to tackle all concerns.

The Union-wide Effort

The people who do the work are in the best position to find out what is wrong and push for solutions. ATU and TWU are working together on health and safety issues for transit workers across the US and Canada. Current targets include restroom access and operator assaults. For assistance with training, strategizing, coalition-building, collective bargaining, and data collection, contact the International Union.