

Workplace Safety

By Pete Clark

On a sunny, warming June morning in 1961, I gave my union clearance to the General Foreman at the show-up location for a powerline construction job on South Pass. I had been sent out by I.B.E.W. Local #322 in Casper, Wyoming. My dad was a Powder Monkey in the union and had asked the Local's Business Administrator to allow me to join the union and work until fall classes began at Wyoming. I was assigned to a tree company that was clearing a portion of the right-of-way of sylvan obstructions. I was happy with the situation, as I had devastated my spine, from head to pelvis the year before and this job would give me the opportunity to see if I could still lift my end of a two hundred-plus pound log.

A man-haul, which is linehand speak for a van, dropped five of us off by the chipper. The tree foreman's pickup was setting next to the machine. The foreman gave three of the men the task of collecting detritus to be chipped. He told me and the other man to gas up the chipper and check its oil and coolant. As soon as we finished fueling and checking the machine, the foreman pressed its starter button. The chipper groaned at being awakened and then roared into life.

We began work with a pile of waste, leftover from a previous day. We fed branches, large and small, into the mouth of the chipper. They came out the other end looking like the organic matter used for land scaping. After lunch, my head began to hurt. By quitting time, I had a tremendous headache. During the man-haul ride back to the show-up, my partner for the day had the same complaint.

The next morning, I told the shop steward about developing a severe headache while working around the chipper. He came directly from the show-up to our work area and examined the machine. The tree company foreman asked him what he was doing. The shop steward asked him why the exhaust riser was missing from the machine. The foreman told him the riser had fallen off and the mechanic had not had the time to fix it. The shop steward told him to shut down the chipper until the pipe was replaced, as he wanted no more carbon monoxide poisonings.

Unions are valuable for higher pay scales and many other reasons. The fading benefits that workers enjoy today were gained through hard-fought battles and negotiations by Organized Labor. If you have doubts about this, look at the strife in the Colorado coal fields during the early Twentieth Century. I would not work in heavy construction without a strong union backing me and money is not the main reason. Too many companies put profit far ahead of safety. Today, it seems that one must be a doctor, a lawyer or a professional athlete to enjoy the advantages of union membership.