April 26, 2017

Lee County Labor Chapter
Keokuk, Iowa

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

It was an honor and a privilege to spend time with members of the Lee County Labor Chapter earlier this year as we strategized together to improve workplace safety and health conditions; fight the assaults on our rights to safe jobs; confront “blame-the-worker” safety programs that threaten both safety and solidarity; and build strong member-involved local unions and labor chapters. I understand that you will be joining unions and workers across the country and around the world in commemorating Workers Memorial Day. This commemoration is so important -- to the Chapter’s local unions, their members and the whole community of working people your region.

Almost 5,000 workers are killed on the job each year in this country. In 2015, 60 of them were Iowa workers who had just gone to work that day to provide for themselves and their families. Another 50,000 workers in the US die annually from occupational disease. These statistics are really just human beings, with the tears wiped away. But our tears for our brothers and sisters who have lost their lives on the job will never be wiped away. Nor will our resolve to change the conditions that stole them from their families and our communities.

How many of these workers had their lives cut short because employers were trying to get too few workers to handle too much work, too fast, for too many hours? Or work with equipment that was not properly maintained or repaired? Or around chemicals that could have been replaced with safer substitutes? Or put them in hazardous conditions that should have been eliminated? Were design flaws ignored? Did employers skimp on basic safety protections? Were profits more important than the lives of these sisters and brothers? For shame!

To add insult to injury, illness and death, how many employers are still trying to silence workers who are “whistleblowers” – those who speak up about hazards on the job, or report injuries -- by retaliating against them? Speaking out about hazards and injuries is an essential part of finding and fixing hazardous workplace conditions! Of the top ten US employers that have received the most complaints about retaliation, seven of them are rail carriers. For shame!

All workers need and deserve good jobs – with good health and safety conditions. And they need a protected and collective voice with which to speak. Unions provide this protected, collective voice; having a union is an important first step in engaging the battle for good jobs and safe workplaces.
On Workers Memorial Day we re-dedicate ourselves to building and maintaining strong, active unions and coalitions in our communities to organize and fight back against all that gets in the way of good, safe and healthy jobs. In the immortal words of Mother Jones, we will mourn for the dead, and fight like hell for the living! What better way to honor those who have lost their lives than to help create a brighter future of for those who remain, and the generations who will be entering the workforce?

In closing, I would like to share a poem written by a Canadian Union Brother, Bob Hatfield:

Their labours are ended
They have laid down their tools for the last time
Their meeting is adjourned
All outstanding motions tabled
For some, it was a long journey
With a peaceful, slipping away at the end
For others, it was too short
With a fearful, painful, tragic departure
As we finish the shift, quit at the end of the day
Switch off the lights, we remember them
We remember their successes, their kindnesses,
    their quirks, their foibles
We tell the jokes that they told.
Now that their final dead line is past,
Dreams, hopes and desires that are still unfulfilled
Are left to us to complete.
We continue where they left off,
Move that their motions be lifted from the table,
Pick up the tools, once theirs, now ours
Together we continue their labours which have become ours.

Thank you, Brothers and Sisters of the Lee County Labor Chapter, for all you do and will do to improve working conditions and the lives of workers and their families throughout your region!
In Solidarity,
Nancy

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