Workers Health Bureau Encyclopedia Article

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Contents

Workers Health Bureau Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Workers Health Bureau.....3

Workers Health Bureau

The Workers Health Bureau of America (WHB), active from 1921 to 1928, was a grassroots organization run by Grace Burnham, Harriet Silverman, and Charlotte Todes. Primarily an advocacy organization, WHB is known for focusing public attention on occupational health and safety issues for the first time. The bureau endorsed local trade labor unions' efforts to improve workers' health conditions. WHB conducted investigations, wrote informational reports, and organized union movements. During its eight years, WHB enjoyed the membership of approximately 180 local trade unions and garnered support from leading public health experts.

WHB contended that workers' health problems resulted from a combination of industrial employment and urban living. The bureau had little confidence in government agencies' abilities to improve working conditions, although it did advocate for changes in national labor laws. Considering workers' problems a class issue, WHB solicited memberships among workers and unions in exchange for help in improving work conditions at the local level. WHB advised employees and labor unions to solve problems at their source. By advocating that unions add health and safety clauses into their employment contracts, WHB hoped that employers would proactively improve conditions in their plants.

The bureau concentrated on the most common occupational health problems of the time. Some of WHB's major campaigns addressed workplace exposures to benzol, carbon dioxide, coal and silica dust, lead, and mercury. The bureau used scientific studies and terminology to strengthen their arguments in highly politicized debates. Ironically, WHB ended its work in 1928 because it was too successful. The Affiliated Federation of Labor (AFL) pressured local unions to withdraw from WHB, perhaps to rein in their influence over unions. In the end, WHB is best remembered for bringing labor health issues to national attention, beginning the movement that eventually led to the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Bureau (OSHA) in 1970.

Bibliography

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Internet Resource

Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and Tamiment Archives. Available from http://www.nyu.edu/library.