

## PHILAPOSH Memorial Day Event Speech by Jerry Roseman 4/25/2014

\*\* This event was kicked off with the following statement *“Pray for the Dead, Fight Like Hell for the Living.”*  
*Mother Jones*

I have been asked to speak this morning on behalf of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers H & W Fund & Union for whom I act as Director of Environmental Science & Occupational Safety & Health – my relationship with them has been long – almost 30 years – and reflective of a deep commitment to the protection not just of their members but to all those, especially our children, who are occupying and using our public school buildings.

As I speak this morning I would ask that you keep in mind something that the PFT H&W Fund & Union has recognized and repeated many times, and for many years: “The students learning environment is our working environment.” That is in keeping with the major theme here today – the theme of the connection between Worker Safety & Public Safety.

I have chosen to work directly for employees, unions, individuals and the public for more than 30 years because of my firm belief that those who are directly exposed to hazard and risk in the workplace, have an absolute **right to know** about those dangerous conditions and have an absolute **right to participate** in evaluating the hazards – potential and other affecting themselves and their coworkers – and an absolute **right to act** in designing and implementing the measures to prevent their own illnesses, injuries and worse and I am proud to add my voice to the voices of so many others today who are fighting to eliminate the workplace health and safety hazards that impact the lives of so many of us.;

This Memorial Day event may be a solemn occasion but it is also an opportunity for us to come together to demand that what are often **preventable conditions are in-fact prevented** - before workers or members of the public, or the children in our schools, are injured, made ill or die;

The Market St. building collapse last year was a catastrophic example of the direct connection between public safety and worker safety. There are many other situations, although even if less immediately devastating, that put workers and the public at grave risk. Sand blasting and high-speed sawing and cutting of city stone and cement block on the streets of our city can pose serious silica dust hazards. Improperly controlled lead removal activities or removal and demolition work in buildings with asbestos also results in exposures that can cause sickness and death; Exposures to asbestos, lead, mold, and other health hazards in our schools present respiratory hazards that impact not just occupant health but also on educational achievement and fiscal sustainability.

These types of exposures are much too common and demonstrate that even the less-obvious & even unseen hazards must be recognized and controlled. Unlike a fall from a roof, a bridge or scaffolding,

where the hazard and it's direct result are clear, what these "health hazard" situations have in common is not just that workers and the public are put at risk of developing cancer and respiratory diseases including asthma, silicosis, & asbestosis , but that these diseases can take years to show up making it hard to connect cause and effect and sometimes difficult to convince employers and building owners to do the right thing. Therefore we must work to ensure that all of these situations - workplace safety **AND** workplace health hazard risks - receive timely, accountable and aggressive worksite evaluation, assessment and enforcement.

In my more than 30 years of working in environmental science and occupational safety and health and with the PFTH&W F/U, and others in Philadelphia and around the country, I have constantly advocated following what is referred to as the **Precautionary Principle** when recommending how to assess and control workplace hazards. The Precautionary Principle, taken in it's simplest form, states what should be obvious -- that we should carefully evaluate the health and safety dangers **POTENTIALLY** posed by a situation and set of conditions and, if it looks risky, we should err on the side of caution and implement protections instead of saying, "It will probably by fine, no one will get hurt" and then having to deal with the terrible consequences of a wrong decision after the fact. The PFTH&W Fund & Union well understands, and has aggressively supported, the application of this principle in protecting not just their own members but also the children in their charge and the health and safety of all other adult school occupants.

I'd like to add our public schools to the list of workplaces in which both workers and the public are too often placed at serious health risk. Currently there are about 20,000 workers [most of whom are directly represented by the PFT H&W Fund & 32 BJ SEIU District 1201] and 150,000 students, all of whom spend at least 6-8 hours per day in SDP- run schools - that is a huge population exposed to potential health and safety hazards. The **working environment** of all adult school employees, including those represented by the PFT and 32 BJ SEIU Local 1201 **is also the learning environment for our children** - again, the connection between Worker Safety & Public Safety.

Deficient air quality is bad not just for SD workers but also for our children; actually it is even worse – and quite dangerous – to our children and especially to the most vulnerable among us. Mold and bacterial contamination of surfaces and heating and air conditioning systems, airborne contamination from asbestos, fiberglass and lead - all of these things, and more, exist in our schools and present potential health hazards to all building occupants. And, it should be noted, that our children are at even greater risk from these health and safety dangers that are the adults, especially from those things that can cause respiratory illness.

These risks in our schools are real and the extent and scope of the health and safety problems faced are also widespread and largely hidden from view; schools may not look like the typical "dangerous

workplace" but in fact there are many very serious problems that require attention and control – they require the substantive involvement of the unions, and their members, who work in the schools and who are responsible for educating our children. We also remind SDP management that **“Safety Begins at the Top”** – without **top level** management buy-in and commitment to the protection of occupant health and safety – **and demonstrated responsive action** - unacceptable conditions will continue to exist. Good intentions, slick publications, and simply repeating how much SDP management cares are no substitute for accountability, openness and effective action, and we will make no apologies for an aggressive and passionate pursuit of workplace safety and health for all.

Information included in your packets describes some of the respiratory hazards and illnesses faced by our children, teachers, maintenance and custodial workers and other school employees. It details a long list of respiratory diseases including asthma. Asthma is a potentially deadly disease the incidence and prevalence of which has been growing. Particularly since 2004, the U.S. Institute of Medicine, the World Health Organization, the CDC-NIOSH, & the EPA among others have clearly documented the relationships between the types of conditions we see in our schools here in Philadelphia, as well as in other schools around the country, and respiratory disease risks to occupants;

Nationwide, an average of 1 out of every 11 children and 1 out of every 12 adults suffer with asthma - that would mean at least 15,000 of our school children and 2,000 of our workers could be expected to have asthma in the Phila schools. But the childhood asthma prevalence in our city is much worse than this because we have more than double the national rate meaning that we are more likely to see something like 30,000 – 40,000 students in our schools who have asthma. Additionally, there is a major social justice and equity concern here as well - children of color are at particular risk with some estimates of asthma incidence, in Philadelphia school children, being as high as 30%.

The reason I am highlighting these statistics today is because this disease is worsened, dramatically, and asthma attacks are known to be triggered by, exposures to dust, and by damage to building materials caused by persistent moisture, dampness, and mold, as well as by allergens associated with rodents and insects and generally inadequate air quality - **all things we have in way too much of in of our schools;**

The health impacts of these workplace conditions and hazards are difficult to overstate. Each year, across the U.S., as many as 2 million ER visits occur because of asthma, 500,000 hospitalizations and 9 million visits to doctors are needed because of this one respiratory disease. 15% - 20% of children with asthma will likely end up in an ER at least once/yr and, most tragically, 9 people die from asthma attacks each day.

Sadly, in September of last year a 12 year old PSD 6th grader was one of those 9 - she died from complications associated with an asthma attack that began when she was at school and, although it is

still unclear exactly what happened, the environmental conditions in her building were known to be severely deficient.

Still too little attention is paid to worker safety and health or to public safety and health in our public schools. Reasons cited often include the lack of money, long-term building and system deterioration, and the overwhelming scale of the current needs - it is for these reasons and others that necessary and adequate response is not well implemented. We hear, again and again, that we will simply have "To Do More With Less" & "To Manage Expectations." And instead of looking carefully and comprehensively enough at deficient conditions, instead of working with the PFT & 32 BJ SEIU 1201, school staff, parents and others to implement effective and practical solutions, the SD approach is much too limited - in fact, the PSD recently decided that they were even unwilling to participate in a CDC-NIOSH-funded and conducted study that had been in the works and agreed to for about the past 2 years and would have been a joint labor-management effort. Without discussion or notification to unions, teachers, parents or any other members of the public, the SDP management simply informed NIOSH that they were no longer willing to participate in a major study that was designed to examine 50 E.S. documenting damage from persistent moisture and dampness, and characterizing mold, and other respiratory hazards, collecting environmental measurements and conducting health surveys of the several thousand employees working in those buildings as part of the effort to determine the range and severity of hazards posed and to help develop practical and cost effective solutions. Because of the SDP's refusal to participate in the jointly agreed-upon study, the PFT&W F/U and 32 BJ SEIU Dist. 1201 were forced to file a formal Health Hazard Evaluation [HHE] request - with the CDC/NIOSH - which was accepted by their Division of Respiratory Disease Studies [DRDS] and is now in the early stages -- We will just have to wait and see if the SDP decides not to cooperate with the federal government on this study or tries to stop it as well;

I will end by saying again that the experience of the PFT&WF/U in their representation of all occupants has demonstrated, time and again, the critically important nature of the "watchdog" function – independent, involved and knowledgeable participation, at a "granular" level and on with an everyday frequency, is required to keep the PSD management honest and doing the right thing, especially in protecting the health and safety of teachers, children, librarians, custodians and others and that the organized efforts of Philaposh, political representatives, community groups, Philadelphia unions, and others participating here today are also critically important -- the idea of linking together public safety and worker safety - **the working environment and the learning environment** - and standing together, and supporting each other is what it takes to successfully fight for real & needed improvements