

NEW JERSEY STATE AFL-CIO

106 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08608
(609) 989-8730
FAX (609) 989-8734
www.njafclcio.org



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**Testimony of Charles Wowkanech,
President of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO
before the Workforce Protections Subcommittee,
U.S. House Education and Labor Committee
January 14, 2008**

Dear Members of the Workforce Protections Subcommittee:

My name is Charles Wowkanech, President of the New Jersey State AFL-CIO and representative of one million working men and women in the state of New Jersey.

I would like to thank Chairman Miller and distinguished members of this subcommittee for giving me an opportunity to testify at this field hearing.

There were five fatalities in the state of New Jersey in the month of December alone. Two of these fatalities happened at North East Linen in Linden when Victor Diaz and Carlos Diaz were asked by their employer to perform job functions that they were not trained in or evaluated for. OSHA's investigation into these unfortunate incidents will focus on violations of confined space regulations, lack of adequate training and lack of proper safety programs. Someone should be, and will be, held accountable for this unfortunate loss of life. Holding an employer accountable for a preventable workplace tragedy is what the OSHA laws require and the OSH Act and regulations have prevented countless injuries, illnesses and fatalities. However, I believe that it is crucial to the success of this subcommittee's mission that we speak to workplace safety and health solutions that are practiced and promoted by labor unions and advocates of proactive workplace safety and health - solutions that receive little attention from most employers simply because they are not required by any rule of law.

While enforcement is important to ensure that employers are held accountable for a safe and healthful work environment; I believe it is more productive to stress Prevention as a critical part of any effort to reduce workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths.

At the New Jersey State AFL-CIO, our mission is to improve the lives of working families and bring dignity and fairness to the workplace. We work towards that mission by empowering and educating employees throughout the State through a grant provided by the State Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Educating rank-and-file workers ensures that we support OSHA in protecting our state's workforce from harm, and we empower the workers to be active participants in developing workplace policies. It is no great secret that labor unions have played a key role in worker

empowerment and that a unionized workforce is a safer, smarter and stronger workforce. A recent poll released by Employment Law Alliance underscores why unions are critical to better working conditions. Sixty three percent (63%) of the poll respondents said that the top reason to join organized labor is workplace safety. More than 40 percent of those polled believe that unions have a substantial impact on improving the working conditions of average American workers.

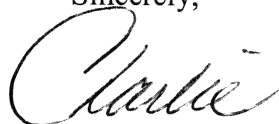
This is the solution that I am talking about here – utilizing our greatest resource and our greatest asset – our workforce – to ensure safe and healthful conditions at every workplace. Numerous studies highlight that a workplace where safety and health programs are crafted with employee input and management commitment is a workplace that has fewer incidents of injuries and illnesses. The New Jersey State AFL-CIO training program has been successfully engaged in doing just that. We have been working closely with unions that represent commercial laundry workers to provide customized training to employees at laundry facilities so that they understand the hazards at their jobs and know what steps to take to protect them from harm.

Research and statistics, compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, demonstrate the positive impact of joint labor-management committees on overall injury and illness in the construction industry. There was a 40 percent reduction in injuries and a 20 percent increase in production. Besides direct savings in compensation costs, companies that implement these labor-management cooperative programs see an increase in worker productivity and morale as well as a decrease in equipment and process breakdown and failure. We have seen the positive impact of joint labor-management committees in other industries – now is the time to make these committees the standard in the commercial laundry industry.

Today, I challenge North East Linen to empower and educate its workforce – by establishing a joint labor-management committee and utilizing free resources provided by the State’s Occupational Safety and Health Education Program (OSHEP) led by Rutgers University.

I appreciate and applaud the commitment of this subcommittee to investigate these workplace tragedies, and respectfully request that the subcommittee, in its findings, requires the establishment of a joint labor-management committee at North East Linen and requires that the company offer safety and health training to all its employees through the services offered by the state funded and approved training program. There will be no greater tribute to Victor Diaz and Carlos Diaz than establishing a joint labor-management committee and educating employees at North East Linen to implement safe working practices. There is no better strategy than this to ensure that such a tragedy does not ever happen again in our state or our nation.

Sincerely,



Charles Wowkanech
President