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### **Who Am I?**

My name is Jordan Barab. I spent 16 years running AFSCME's health and safety program, defending and expanding the rights of public employees to work in a safe workplace. Many people don't know it, but in 26 states, public employees don't even have the federally guaranteed right to a safe workplace. And it's not just those "backward" southern states. It's also "progressive" northern states like Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. And we're not talking "just" bureaucrats. We're talking highway workers, public works, wastewater treatment, corrections officers, firefighters, health care workers, mental health workers, social workers, bridge workers and on and on. Some of the most dangerous, undervalued, unappealing, but necessary work that this society demands to be able to live the relatively safe and comfortable lives Americans have become accustomed to.

In 1998, I was appointed a Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for OSHA, serving as national Labor Liaison, ergonomics coordinator and other duties. That was a "political appointment," so I turned into a pumpkin at noon, January 20, 2001. I then "consulted" for the AFL-CIO Health and Safety Department for a year and a half. Now I have a different day job, and in my "spare" time, this.

### **Why Am I Here?**

Several Reasons:

Working people need more workplace health and safety resources; not just fact sheets and health and safety manuals and Material Safety Data Sheets. All that is important, but they also need opinion and commentary on the politics of workplace health and safety.

Everything in this country is political -- with a capital "P" or a small "p." We all know about workplace politics. It's often not lack of information or guidelines that's keeping your employer from making the workplace safe. It's money, or control issues, or willful negligence. And in Washington D.C. or your state capitals, it's Politics with a capital "P." The Republicans and even some Democrats find more to fear (or more \$ to gain) from the business lobbyists than from workers or unions. And then they lie about it. We can't have workplace protections because they cost too much, or there's not enough science, or they're "one size fits all" or the best government is the least government, or, or, or, or....

There are millions of people out there who go to work every day fearing that they won't come home alive or healthy at the end of the day; or that they won't live long enough to enjoy their retirement. Some are in unions, most aren't. They all need to know that there are technical resources out there. And they all need to know that politics matters, voting matters -- in national and local elections. It matters in big ways and small way, but it also matters in how safe their workplaces are going to be. It matters whether their children are going to grow up with unhealthy injured parents, or no parents at all. People need to understand that everything is connected. Tax cuts, growing deficits, appropriations, executive orders, regulatory "reform" -- it all affects our

safety every day.

And much of the most grievous harm is done in the most invisible ways. After 10 years of struggle, OSHA finally issued an ergonomics standard in November 2000. The Republican-controlled Congress, with virtually no debate, repealed those protections in March 2001. They used a little-known, and never-before-used law called the Congressional Review Act, a piece of legislation, tacked onto a larger bill way back in the early Gingrich years, a bomb lying dormant and unnoticed until it was activated when Bush Administration was selected. No one knew until it was too late -- and millions of American workers now pay the price every year in painful disability.

By the way, if you like this "Blog," spread it around. I'd like to get it linked in as many local and national union and COSH WebPages as possible. And write me. I'd like your opinions and your contributions.

*Member, National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981*

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