

# **Spanish-Speaking Construction Workers Discuss Their Safety Needs and Experiences**

## **Residential Construction Training Program Evaluation Report**

**Ruth Ruttenberg**

**Maria Lazo**

Ruth Ruttenberg and Associates, Bethesda, Maryland

**February 2004**

© 2004, The Center to Protect Workers' Rights. All rights reserved. This research was made possible by the Center to Protect Workers' Rights (CPWR) as part of a small-study research agreement with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, NIOSH (NIOSH grant CCU317202). The research is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily

# **Spanish-Speaking Workers Discuss Their Safety Needs and Experiences**

## **Summary**

*I think that, in the future, training in one's own language will be available and, when*



# Contents



Language is a substantial barrier to safety and health for Hispanic construction workers. In realization of this, The Center to Protect Workers Rights (CPWR), in cooperation with the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), sponsored the development and presentation of a Spanish version of 10-hour safety and health training for union and non-union workers in residential construction. Trainers, class materials, and handouts were provided to reach out to some of the hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking construction workers in the United States who have trouble reading, speaking, and understanding English.

This report summarizes 47 in-depth telephone interviews with construction workers who received the training in Spanish from CPWR in 2001. The interviews were conducted to determine whether the 10-hour program led to better safety and health at work and a better quality of working life. Maria Lazo conducted the interviews in Spanish. (*See* appendixes.)

The project is a follow-up to a 2002 evaluation of the 2001 OSHA-supported 10-hour program (*see* Ruttenberg 2001).

The questionnaire for the new survey focused on five areas:

***Effects of language barriers.***

workers, partly because they do not speak English well or at all. At many job sites, safety instructions and warnings appear only in English.

To compound the language problem, many Hispanic construction workers in the U.S. have limited literacy in Spanish, as well as in English. The 2000 Census reported that 43% of the Hispanic population had not earned a high school diploma, compared to 11% of the non-Hispanic population. Among foreign-born U.S. residents from Latin America – more than half of the 33 million Hispanic U.S. residents born outside the U.S. – 35% have less than a ninth-grade education (*see* Therrien and Ramirez 2003; NIOSH 2002b).

Responding to the seriousness of the safety and health risks for Hispanic workers, OSHA Secretary John Henshaw in March 2002 signed an agreement to promote safe and healthful working conditions for Hispanic construction workers. His stated focuses were effective safety and health training and increased access to safety and health resources in Spanish (*Hispanic Journal* 2002). The OSHA initiative encourages bilingual individuals in construction to take OSHA's train-the-trainer class (in English) so they can teach the 10-hour and 30-hour construction safety and health courses in Spanish.

Increasingly, employers, union personnel, and other trainers are recognizing the need for Spanish-language materials and training. A 2002 survey of 77 participants at a national construction safety conference in Illinois, about ha



or maybe they didn't understand English so they didn't learn how to do it. So the foreman gets frustrated and just tells them to skip that part because they don't understand. They just do it without safety equipment or procedures."

### **Importance of Spanish- (and English-) language training**

Most said that when they took training in English, they did not understand a substantial amount. They also said that, even when they understood what was being said, they did not have the language skills to ask questions or participate in discussions. Only six of the 47 recalled having had the opportunity to take a safety and health course in Spanish before taking the CPWR training. As a group, they found the CPWR brochures, overheads, and Spanish-speaking instructors very helpful; only 4 found the Spanish materials and instructors "not necessary."

Said one worker: "If workers with limited English have a concern or doubt, they have to keep it for themselves because they can't communicate it to others. Like right now, I don't know exactly how many feet the ladder should be placed from the wall."

A Wisconsin roofer with 29 years' experience said he was surprised during the training. "It was the first time I could understand and all that was said was new to me even though I received some training in English." He said that, even though he has improved his English oral language abilities a lot (not as much with writing and reading), with training in Spanish he can "take home 100% of the knowledge given." He said that using translators is not the same, because it is difficult for translators to catch everything and explain it. Translators "only give the idea." Before the training, there were many terms he didn't know.

A 60-year-old Cuban-born electrician, with 23 years of experience in the U.S. said, "Training in our own language is very important. When I don't understand, I can always ask for help. We will get more benefit, and we will prevent more accidents. ...I had bitter situations when trained in English only. It is easier for me because of my years of experience to associate my work with the training and understand. But what about those that are new in the construction work? It is impossible for them to understand training in English and know the difference, for example, between two similar things like generators and transformers."

A 28-year-old bricklayer, born in the U.S., who said he now speaks more English than Spanish, still praised the availability of Spanish materials. "At the end it will also benefit non-Spanish speakers because workers will be better trained and accidents will be prevented. Sometimes many workers are affected because of lack of training of other workers."

Several of the trainees were quick to point out that Spanish-language training should not rule out having Spanish-speaking construction workers learn at least key words in English. "I think training should be bilingual, not only in Spanish," one worker said. "We have to learn English to differentiate signs, warning signs, etc."

A 31-year-old roofer said he has the identical CPWR training materials in Spanish and English. He compares them to better understand the English. He said that he always has the publications on hand and even had them in front of him at the moment of the interview (by telephone).

Said another, "I think we need to learn at least basic English, otherwise there will be problems at the work site. Be trained in Spanish, but learn English also."

### **Safety and health awareness and working conditions**

The 47 who were interviewed were asked seven open-ended questions, to gauge their concerns about safety and health and other workplace issues (44, or 94%, were working union). Forty-one (87%) of those interviewed had concerns about safety and health, safety and health training, and working conditions generally. By contrast, only about half expressed concerns about getting more skill training, and only about 25 to 40% expressed concerns about increasing their wages, getting health insurance or better health insurance, or getting full-time work:



proper access; and the scaffolds were tied off to the building properly. In contrast only one individual said that those scaffold conditions (or any of them) were met in his native country.

***Material safety data sheets or other safety information sheets.*** All but one of the 18 said MSDSs were available at the last work site. And all but one of the 17 who had access to MSDSs, said they had asked for safety information sheets at least once since the training.

***Other safety practices.*** For 20 tool types, all 18 said they had tools that were generally adequate and in good condition at their last construction job. Only four of the 18 workers said these same 20 tools were adequate and in good condition when they were working in their native countries. This was true for hammers, nailers, saws, screwdrivers, and wrenches. For all other tools, only 2 or 3 trainees said those tools had been adequate and in good condition.

Where lockout/tagout was needed, all 18 said they had used the procedures when maintaining and repairing equipment. Only 2 of 15 said they had used lockout/tagout in their native countries when doing maintenance and repair of equipment.

Sixteen said they had received site-specific training on their last U.S. job, but only one had said that was available in the native country.

### **Comparing union and non-union work experiences**

Individuals who had worked union and non-union were in the United States asked to compare



degree hot asphalt. I always tell my co-workers about how important it is to not rush people because it is very easy to fall.”

Another mentioned the need to be alert to traffic. “After the training I also realized that it is easy for us to be run over by on-site vehicles, so I always make sure that those vehicles have the backup horn working. Now I got to keep my eyes open on what is going on.”

“Many coworkers have burns on their hands, but I don’t,” said another. “I wash my hands very often and use all the protective equipment that is available. I always try to take good care of myself, even though sometimes it is difficult because I am exposed to most types of weather and I must work around wet concrete. Sometimes I am also exposed to falling objects or back injuries. Without training I think I could not have prevented any injuries. Training taught me to work safely and avoid dangerous situations, to use protective equipment like rubber boots, face respirators, gloves, hard hats, kneepads, and

how to do my job safely. Also I am grateful that they taught me how to work with scaffolds [and] ladders and where to place them.”

Another former trainee said, “I had a near-miss experience, but because I followed the instruction given during training I prevented injury. I was wearing safety glasses/goggles when the nail hit my face.”

## **Suggestions for Training**

### **Ways to improve the 10-hour course**

The CPWR course included small-group activities led by Spanish-speaking peer trainers, with Spanish-language guides for trainers, participant handouts, and Power Point slides. Parallel materials were available in English.

The most frequent suggestion was to develop videos in Spanish; eleven of those interviewed asked for videos (without any suggestion or prompt from the interviewer).

There were requests for more graphics and statistics in Spanish.

Another suggestion: “Sometimes trainers talk too much and I can’t figure it out. They should tell us what is a violation and why it is a violation.”

There were requests for more hands-on training. One person asked for demonstrations on how to use harnesses.

Many asked for the training to be longer and offered more often.

Many asked for more Spanish-speaking trainers. One person added, “There are so many Hispanic experienced workers who could be trainers.”

### **Needs for future training**

Many asked for refresher training.

There were many suggestions for additional training materials. A construction worker from Wisconsin said it would help him to have brochures or briefings in Spanish every month.

Spanish training for non-Spanish-speaking supervisors was suggested. Examples were to be Spanish rare Mog



## References

Adriano, Jerry. 2002. Hispanic Contractors of America, quoted in





---

<sup>1</sup> **Personal communication to Ruth Ruttenger by Phil Berger, University of Kentucky (evaluator for NIEHS's**



6. Union and how many years you have been a member:	
International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators Asbestos Workers (H.F.I.A.)	
International Association of Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers (B.S.O.I.W.)	
International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers, and Helpers (B.B.F.)	
International Brotherhood of Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen (B.A.C.)	
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (I.B.E.W.)	
International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades (I.U.P.A.T.)	
International Brotherhood of Teamsters (I.B.T.)	
International Union of Elevator Construction (I.U.E.C.)	
International Union of Operating Engineers (I.U.O.E.)	
Laborers International Union of North America (L.I.U.N.A.)	
Operative Plasterer and Cement Masons International Association of the United States and Canada (O.P.& C.M.I.A.)	
Sheet Metal Workers International Association (S.M.W.I.A.)	
United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (U.A.)	
United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (U.B.C.)	
United Union of Roofers, Waterproofers and Allied Workers (R.W.A.W.)	
I do not belong to a union	

**12. What, if any, difficulties did you have adjusting to construction work in the U.S.?**

- a. None
- b. Pace of work was faster
- c. I had trouble understanding instructions in English
- d. I had never used personal protective equipment
- e. I needed to learn new skills
- f. Other (Please explain)

**If you worked construction outside the U.S. please compare work in your native or other country with work on your last job**

	USA	Native or Other Country
--	-----	-------------------------

	<b>USA</b>	<b>Native or Other Country</b>
	<b>Yes</b>	

	USA			Native or Other Country		
	Yes	No	Not Sure	Yes	No	Not Sure
<b>22. Were tools generally adequate and in good condition?</b>						
Abrasive tools						
Chippers						
Chisels						
Drills						
Grinding tools						
Hammers						
Jacks (lever and ratchet, screw and hydraulic)						
Mechanical power transmission apparatus (belts, shafts, gears, rods, pulleys, similar devices)						
Nailers						
Pneumatic tools						
Power presses						
Power tools						
Sanders						
Saws (circular, radial arm, chain, crosscut, ripsaws)						
Screwdrivers						
Shears						





<b>30. Have you worked both union and non-union in the U.S.</b>		
a. Yes b. I have only worked union c. I have only worked non-union d. I am not sure		
<b>31. What are the differences in your experience between union and non-union work, in providing...</b>	<b>Non-Union</b>	<b>Union</b>
<b>On a scale with</b>		
1 Excellent		
2 Good		
3 Fair		
4 Poor		
5 Non-existing or very poor		
Quality and availability of personal protective equipment?		
Skill Training?		
Safety and Health Training		
Tool Maintenance?		
Culture of Safety? (able to raise concerns, importance of safety, awareness of safety)		
Salary		
Benefits? (Health Insurance, pension, vacation, holidays) Please describe		
Other:		



<b>34. Please list 3 specific safety and health issues faced by construction workers who have limited English.</b>
1.
2.
3.

<b>35. Had you ever had the opportunity to take a health and safety course in Spanish, before this training?</b>	<b>Yes ____</b>	<b>No ____</b>
--	-----------------	----------------

<b>36. During training did you find the Spanish ____ helpful?</b>	<b>Very Helpful</b>	<b>Helpful</b>	<b>Not Important</b>
Brochures			
Overheads			
Spanish-speaking instructors			
Other Comments:			

<b>37. What other types of materials in Spanish would help you? Please list</b>
<b>38. Even if you speak English well, does training in your native language make a difference?</b>
Yes ____ No ____
<b>39. Why? or why not?</b>



**46. Do you have a safety story to tell? If you have experienced a safety or health accident that you think more or better training could have prevented, we would like to hear about it. If you have experienced a “near miss” and training helped to prevent injury, we would like to hear about that too.**

**47. Other Comments:**

Thank you very much for your help.

**Many people say that Hispanics are like donkeys when working, but we also need to work safely.**

**Thank you for the training; I learned how to prevent accidents and work with caution.**

**Thank you for the training. I had never received any materials in my own language before.**

**I think the Spanish materials were great. I thank the people who gave me the opportunity of being trained in my own language. There is more opportunity to understand everything and prevent accidents. Also, if an accident occurs, we will be better prepared to know our role.**

**I thank all the people who gave me the opportunity of being trained because I can sustain my family and be safe.**

**Being trained in our own language is the best gift for us. A thank you for your hard work.**

**I loved the training. I only wish that in the future all Hispanic workers with limited English would be trained in their own language.**

**Thank you for the training. You gave us the tools needed to work safely.**