

Glimpses of Occupational and Health Act 1994 (OSHA) Part 1: Permit to Work - A Must

N Ravi Menon*

INTRODUCTION

The current Occupational Safety and Health Act or OSHA 1994 is completely different from its precursor, the Factory and Machinery Act 1967 (FMA) it replaced. While the FMA was prescriptive, limited and government depended, the OSHA 1994 is based on self-regulation, consultation and workers' co-operation with a broad range of worker's population. The philosophy and the guiding principles are summarised by Lord Alfred Robens as the responsibilities to ensure safety and health at the work place lies with those who create the risk and those who work with the risks.

The people who are involved in ensuring the welfare of the workers should make sincere efforts to make any work place a safe haven to work. Unfortunately in reality, this does not seem to be the case, due to lack of concern by the management, as well as the employees for the safety of workers in work places. It is not even necessary for

the government to pass an Act for ensuring the safety and health of workers if the employers are considerate towards their workers and undertake measures to ensure their welfare. The need for a legislation for every aspect of interaction between employer and employees indicates that there is room for improvement in mutual relationship between employers and employees.

The Act is applicable in all economic activities specified under the first schedule:

- manufacturing;
- mining and quarry;
- construction;
- agriculture, forestry and fishing;
- utilities: electricity, gas, water and sanitary service;
- transport, storage and communication;
- wholesale and retail traders;
- hotel and restaurant;
- finance, insurance, real estate business services; and
- public services and statutory authorities.

However, onboard ships are excluded as it is governed by Merchant Shipping Ordinances 1952 for Peninsular and 1960 for Sabah and Sarawak, and Armed Forces.

* Malaysian Palm Oil Board,
6 Persiaran Institusi, Bandar Baru Bangi,
43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia.
E-mail: nravi@mpob.gov.my

GENERAL

The employers and self-employed persons 'so far as applicable' should under Section 15(2) (a) of the OSHA 1967 Act provide and maintain safe plant and system of work without risk to health.

The dust particles in the kernel station can be considered to be detrimental to the health of workers. Now the question arises as to what extent the clause 'as far as practicable' can be applied. It is certainly possible to reduce the impact of excessive dust particles by using masks or by trapping the dust particles in bags through an induced draft fan, as this can be taken up under, 'as far as practicable'. If the cost is not prohibitive, the mill management should strive to remove the dust from the kernel station, as the dust can be hazardous to health. If the cost is prohibitive with the available systems it is always possible to find a cheaper alternative like face masks.

PERMIT TO WORK

The maintenance work carried out in palm oil mill conveyors such as screw conveyors is carried out with insufficient attention given for the safety of the workers. When work is carried out there are instance of conveyors being switched on. This arises

due the absence of safety precautions like electrical and mechanical isolations of the plant, hanging danger boards on starters and removal of fuses. In palm oil mills such a system does not exist despite the number of accidents. It is high time such a system is in force.

It is not uncommon for workers to enter sterilisers to hook back the short chains that connect two steriliser cages, when the cages get detached, as shown in *Figure 1*. There are reported cases of someone who appear at the scene and unaware of one worker being inside, closes the door and admit steam into the steriliser. The very thought of the plight of the worker when steam at 142°C envelopes him is disturbing. Even if such incidences may be far flung it should never be allowed even once and the only way is to have the following precautionary measures professionally executed.

- Issuance of a permit to work (PTW) allowing a worker to go inside the steriliser with his name clearly written in the permit;
- Locking up the steriliser control switch board after removing the fuses to cut off the electrical supply to the steriliser control unit;
- Placing a danger board on the control panel;
- Steriliser door to be kept in open position and locked in that position with a

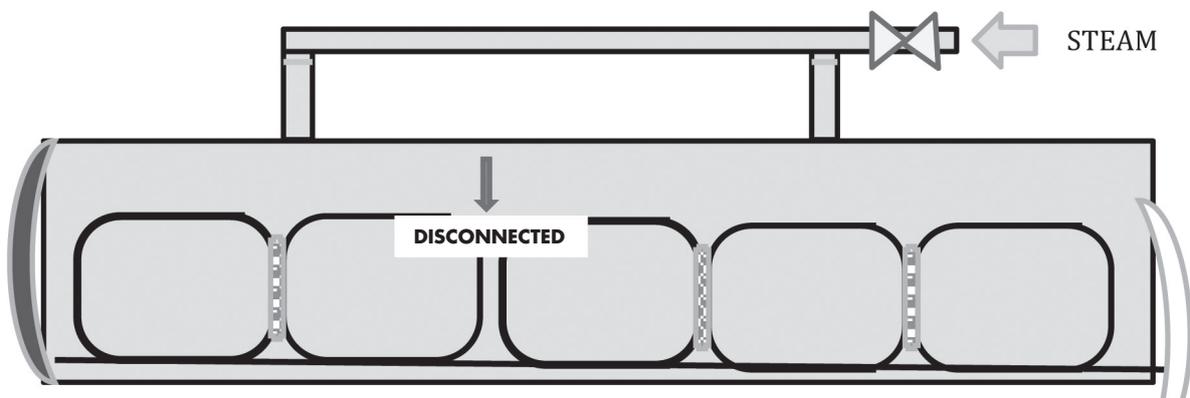


Figure 1. One-door steriliser cages linked together - one link has broken loose.

chain and pad lock so that no one can close it;

- A sign board to be hung on the door with the words 'Worker inside. Do not close' even if it is for a short time the procedure must be followed to safeguard a man's life; and
- Similar system must be used for any emergency conveyor maintenance that need to be done after starting the mill processing.

DANGER BOARDS

This is generally written in the language used by the workers. If most of the workers are Bangladeshis then it is logical to get the signage in their language as the idea is to communicate as easily as possible. It is no use writing in English if they cannot read or understand English.

In the next issue, we shall discuss the PTW in more detail.

