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ERGONOMICS CLASS POPULAR WITH OPERATING ENGINEERS

For two hours, operating engineers in Boston talk about their aches and pains. And nobody says it's boring. Members of Local 4 of the International Union of Operating Engineers are taking a new class on ergonomics. In 1996-97, 140 employed engineers took nine classes.

Ergonomics is fitting the job and the workplace to the worker's health needs — like cutting the vibration in a cab seat or making a tool handle big so it will fit well in a worker's hand.

Taught by Susan Moir and Dorothy Wigmore, of the University of Massachusetts Lowell, the class uses the engineers' input. After all, workers know the most about their jobs. The 15 or so engineers in each class are given open-ended questions, questions that can't be answered just "yes" or "no." And the engineers learn in groups. One thing they do is mark the spots on a chart of a body — a body map — to show where their work causes pains.

Each 2-hour class answers four questions: What hurts? What makes it hurt? How do we find it? How do we fix it? After the engineers fill out a body map, they draw the equipment they work with and mark what needs fixing. In-between, they talk about what scientists say are "risk factors" for the sprains and strains.

Moir says the class is not to teach the engineers to act a certain way. Instead, it is to help them make decisions. When workers can identify parts of their job that can cause pain, they can begin to do something about the problems — if they can work with contractors and equipment manufacturers.

The class has been developed as part of ergonomics research with the Center to Protect Workers' Rights. Moir is director of the Construction Occupational Health Project at the university. She and Wigmore, a research assistant, presented the class to 65 IUOE trainers at a national meeting in April.

UMass Lowell will survey the trainees by phone in 1997-98 to help evaluate the effects of the class. If the reviews are good, Moir's project may expand the training to other trades and other issues.

Ergonomic concept	Open question	Activity
Work-related musculoskeletal disorders	What hurts?	Body map
Risk factors	What makes it hurt?	Matching knowledge
Job analysis	How do we find it?	Risk map
Job redesign	How do we fix it?	List and sort