



# STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

## A Steward's Guide to Safety Data Sheets

USW Members work with various chemicals, solvents, gases, and hazardous materials. What do you do as a steward if a member wants to know about a new solvent the employer uses for making or cleaning things? Do you know if it poses any hazards to your health and safety? How can you protect yourself and your Union siblings?

The information you seek is generally in the manufacturer's Safety Data Sheets (SDS). These documents are your go-to guide for details on handling chemicals safely. In short, they're a cheat sheet for avoiding accidents and health problems.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires employers to have an SDS for every hazardous chemical used in your workplace. These regulations fall under the [Occupational Safety and Health Act's HAZCOM standard](#), also called the "right to know."

[Per OSHA's 1910.1200\(g\)\(8\).](#)

*The employer shall maintain in the workplace copies of the required safety data sheets for each hazardous chemical and shall ensure that they are readily accessible during each work shift to employees when they are in their work area(s). (Electronic access and other alternatives to maintaining paper copies of the safety data sheets are permitted as long as no barriers to immediate employee access in each workplace are created by such options.)*

### What is an SDS?

An SDS is a chemical "user manual" (they were previously known as Material Safety Data Sheets or "MSDS"). They tell you what's in a product, how it can harm you, and how to use it safely.

### Let's Break Down the SDS.

Each SDS has 16 sections, each one of them containing helpful information. Here's a quick rundown of each point:

1. **Identification:** Who made it? What is it called? What is it used for?
2. **Hazard(s) identification:** How can it harm me or the environment?
3. **Composition/information on ingredients:** What is in it?
4. **First-aid measures:** What do I do if someone is exposed to it? What symptoms are associated with exposure?
5. **Fire-fighting measures:** How is a fire caused by this chemical extinguished?
6. **Accidental release measures:** What should be done if there's a spill, leak, or release of this material?
7. **Handling and storage:** How should this material be stored?
8. **Exposure controls/personal protection:** What PPE should

be worn while handling this material? What are the exposure limits? What are the appropriate engineering controls for this material?

9. **Physical and chemical properties:** What does it look like? At what point does it boil?
10. **Stability and reactivity:** Will it explode? Can it react with other stuff?
11. **Toxicological information:** How toxic is it?
12. **Ecological information:** How does it affect the environment?
13. **Disposal considerations:** How can this material be safely disposed of?
14. **Transport information:** Are there any special rules for transporting it?
15. **Regulatory information:** What legal requirements are associated with this chemical? (Specific rules issued by the Department of Transportation, Consumer Product Safety Commission, etc.?)
16. **Other information:** What is essential to know about when working with this material?

### Using an SDS: A Step-by-Step Guide.

Now that we know what an SDS is, let's discuss how to use it. Employers are responsible for providing workplaces free of recognized hazards—it's our job as union leaders to hold them accountable and build a stronger union around health and safety!

- ▶ **Identify the hazards:** Know what you're dealing with. Make sure to eliminate and control hazards using the [hierarchy of controls](#).
- ▶ **Take safety measures:** Wear the correct personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, goggles, or respirators, handle the chemical, and store it safely according to the manufacturer's recommendations.
- ▶ **Prepare for emergencies:** Know what to do if something goes wrong. The employer should have a comprehensive emergency response plan, which includes procedures for dealing with spills, leaks, or other accidents involving hazardous chemicals, and make sure everyone knows it.
- ▶ **Ensure your employer provides the proper training and education:** Ensure everyone handling the chemical knows how to do it safely.

### Reviewing an SDS Matters.

Using an SDS can help prevent illnesses and harmful exposure. They're a legal requirement and crucial for keeping you and your union siblings safe. So, the next time you're handling a chemical, take a moment to check out its SDS. It's hard to fix

hazards you are unaware of, and what you learn may save you and your members from potential illness or death.

### Incomplete Information?

In a joint analysis, the BlueGreen Alliance with Clearya analyzed more than 650 SDSs. They found that 30% had missing or inaccurate health harm warnings. Fifteen percent of the products with carcinogens didn't have a cancer warning, and 21% of the products with chemicals known to harm fertility or fetal development did not warn of that health hazard. Their "[Obstructing the Right to Know](#)" report is available for download.

Workplace safety and health have been a core priority of the USW since its founding in 1942. If you want to learn how to improve workplace safety and health, contact your USW Staff Representative to see what training is available. In the meantime, here are some resources to help you make your workplace safer.

- [United Steelworkers Health Safety and Environment Department](#)
- [Tony Mazzocchi Center](#)
- [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#)
- [Mine Safety and Health Administration](#)

## Union Members as Labor Educators

Are you a steward looking to spread the union's message? Consider this scenario: a single worker without a union takes a one-page list of their hopes and dreams to their boss. The boss rips it up. Then a group of union workers present a hardback book of all the union members' hopes and dreams. The boss can't tear it apart.

It's a live-action metaphor for the power of solidarity and a sketch put on by high school students during a union education program created by members of USW Local 9443 and the Tri-County Labor Council in western Kentucky.

Local 9443 members Kevin Walton, Charlie Hiatt, and Bryan Combs started the program with other unions affiliated with the Tri-County Labor Council about ten years ago. A member of the Pipefitters union's niece teaches at an area high school, and they used that connection to get their collective foot in the door by tabling at Career Day.

While tabling, they were able to talk with students about apprentice programs and the benefits of being a union member, but it was tough to connect. Over time, they kept looking for opportunities and building on personal connections. The program evolved so that they now speak in front of students in classrooms and auditoriums. They had the foresight to track how many kids they've reached from the beginning, and they're currently at an astonishing 10,955!

They credit the program's growth to positive word-of-mouth reviews, so they just kept approaching folks looking for opportunities. So far, no one has turned down their offer. Combs says, "*Somebody somewhere knows a teacher. I mean, my wife's a teacher. Somebody you work with is going to know somebody, and we get in the door that way.*"

Working with the social studies teacher, they were invited to speak in class about labor history while the students were learning about industrialization. They worked with the USW's Education Department to set up a program focusing on making it interactive so that it would hold the teenagers' attention. To help keep the energy up, they usually go with five or six presenters so that it's not just one person lecturing at the class.

Hiatt says they also do some research ahead of time on how the unions came to be in the area and look for old photos of child labor "*so the kids can see what it would be like and when we look up the names of the kids in the photos they have the same*

*last names as some of the kids in the class.*"

They also show modern photos of Steelworker facilities, like a paper plant, and USW members at work. The trades unions show pictures of ongoing construction projects in the area. That way, the students will also get a sense of what union workers look like today.

Walton says, "*We also emphasize that all work, no matter what field you go into, there's a union for it. We want them to understand that too. It's not only what we're showing you; there's union work in everything.*"

Combs says that when he was in school no one ever talked about unions, and says he can see the impact in his community. "*About a month ago, we went out to eat, and the girl who was my waitress came up to me and said, 'You're the guy who came to my school talking about the unions, aren't you?'*" It turns out the young woman is now going to join the trades and be a welder.

To reach more students like her, the three brothers from 9443 encourage those setting up a program like theirs to put together a diverse group. Hiatt says, "*We're really pushing trying to get more women to present with us.*" Walton adds, "*We're in a male-dominated industry in this area, so it would help for young women to see other women doing this work, too. I imagine it's dependent on what area you're in to determine who you need to get involved.*"

In addition to getting more folks involved with their program, they're hoping that the idea will catch on elsewhere. Walton, who is also the President of the Labor Council, says, "*We've put it out there that we'd like to help other councils get their own program started.*"

They joke that they're a "pre-Next Gen" incubator, but it's clear that all three of them are passionate about reaching the students who are the future of labor.

Growing up, Combs says he heard the saying, "*The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago; the second-best time is today. So, we're planting trees right now. It's never too late to get started.*"