

Workers' Health International Newsletter

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PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Workers are catching disease epidemics overlooked by official safety agencies

Official agencies can miss entirely epidemics of occupational disease, new union research has found.

Workplace risk and body mapping techniques (see *WHIN* 53) have unearthed hundreds of cases of work-related cancers and other health complaints at two Canadian workplaces - an epidemic official health and safety and government health, statistics and compensation agencies had totally missed.

Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW) National President Buzz Hargrove says Ontario is sitting on a health and safety time bomb. He made the comment as the CAW released its second report on the health of workers at the former Holmes Foundry and Caposite plants in Sarnia.

The report deals with government inspection documents - documents which show inspectors tolerated dangerous working conditions at the facility for decades, resulting in widespread ill-health among former employees and their families.

Hargrove says we can expect



JIM BROPHY: "At Holmes, even the milkman has asbestosis."

more cases like this, if the government continues to allow industry to police itself on health and safety issues. "There's absolutely no reason for any worker... to be comfortable that employers and government, left to themselves, will ensure that another group of workers won't face the same crisis."

Workers have developed asbestosis, silicosis, cancers, heart disease and respiratory illnesses.

Vince Vettoretti worked in the foundry as a maintenance mechanic for 15 years and developed

colon cancer long after he retired. He said: "It's about 30 years we're talking about and now I start getting troubles so it really concern me. I saw a lot of my friends, workers they pass away, I mean one right after the other, at least a dozen I know so that kind of concerns me."

The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board has already accepted 51 of 54 claims submitted for industrial diseases arising from the Holmes facilities, and the CAW has over 350 files it is getting ready for the Board.

The health risks were not confined to those who worked in the facility. The CAW now has more than 300 files on people who had only passing contact with the foundry.

Vince Vettoretti's wife Nicole has developed an asbestos scarring on her lung. Doctors say it came from exposure to the asbestos on Vince's work clothes and lunch box. Nicole is angry that the government knew of the health hazards and said nothing.

She said: "Why didn't they do something about it? I'm not very proud about the government today. I was younger before, I didn't understand, but now I understand more, I'm more informed and I'm very disappointed."

Jim Brophy, Director of the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario

Workers (OHCOW) Windsor clinic, said: "We're discovering that the milkman for instance that went into the plant once a day or once every couple of days has asbestosis, the guy that just loaded up the machine."

Working with CAW, OHCOW called a public meeting in Sarnia. Hundreds of ex-workers, their friends and family turned up to "map" the now closed foundry, relating conditions in the workplace and the health problems they believed had been caused by their jobs.

Government agencies had failed to alert workers to the epidemic. Brophy believes that modern industrial practices - where processes and the workforce change and companies come and go - mean this will increasingly be the case. He has used workplace mapping techniques to identify problems otherwise ignored or missed in a number of Canadian workplaces.

In one fibreglass factory, cancers and other conditions missed by previous studies were discovered.

CAW, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and other unions now use mapping techniques - known as participatory action research - as a central element in their union safety programmes. Thousands of union safety representatives have been trained in the techniques.

CAW-LUMA News Digest, 15 May 1999

EPIDEMIOLOGY

Tracking disease is not rocket science

A major study has confirmed that workplace exposures at a US rocket factory are causing cancer - more than eight years after the workers at the plant raised the cancer alarm.

Workers who handled hydrazine, a component of rocket fuel, at Rocketdyne/Atomics International's California laboratory have died from lung cancer at twice the rate of unexposed co-workers, according to a study by the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Public Health.

Researchers were called in after members of the United Auto-workers Union (UAW) raised concerns

about what they believed to be high cancer rates.

The new study, produced with UAW involvement and published in April 1999, also found twice as many deaths from bladder, kidney, and blood and lymphatic system cancers among workers exposed to the toxic chemical.

Researchers analysed the records of 6,107 employees who worked at the facility from 1949, when it opened, until 1993. Workers who built and tested rocket engines were presumed to have had the greatest exposure to the chemical.

According to the study, 44 of

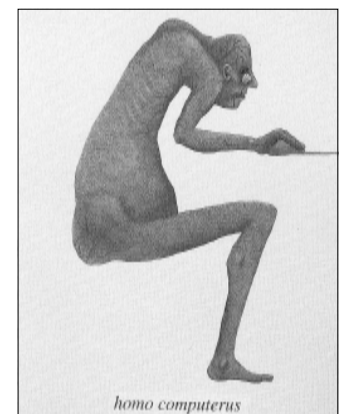
1,053 workers who had heavy contact with hydrazine died of lung cancer, compared to half as many workers who had little or no contact with the substance.

Other chemicals, such as kerosene fuels and trichloroethylene, may have contributed to the increased cancer deaths, the researchers said.

UCLA's Beate Ritz said: "Our best information is that it was hydrazine, but it could be something else related to rocket engine testing. We do know there is an excessive number of cancer deaths among workers in the high-exposure hydrazine group."

The UCLA report is available from the UCLA Public Information Office, James West Center, Box 951431, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1431, USA.

CHANGING WORK: new jobs are killing us too. Pages 20-21



WHIN

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WHIN APPEAL

Join the fight for a safer world of work

WHY IS GLOBALISATION a health and safety issue? Why when you've enough hazards in your own workplace should you find time to concern yourself with what's happening in the US, Korea, Canada, Mexico, India, Zimbabwe, Italy or Japan? What difference does it all make to you?

It makes a world of difference. Today 51 of the world's top 100 economies are companies, not countries. Multinationals think globally, and have the economic muscle to make governments listen.

The only international industry police force with real, enforceable sanctions, the World Trade Organisation, uses its muscle to protect trade at the expense of workplace safety and environmental standards.

Poisonous exports can have global protection, while workers can't. Workers everywhere are told to expect worse conditions, less security and lower wages because "that's the reality of global trade".

Global trade rules have been used to protect trade in poisonous fuel additives and asbestos.

Action against forced labour in Burma and exploitation of banana workers throughout Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific was blocked by World Trade Organisation action.

For over a decade, *Workers' Health International Newsletter* (WHIN) has worked without any core funding or statutory assistance. Its goal has been to highlight the problems facing working people as a result of globalisation of trade and globalisation of capital. **WHIN** aims to provide trades unions and safety activists with the information and resources to expose and challenge threats to workplace health and safety.

WHIN's unpaid staff answer hundreds of queries each year and help co-ordinate global information exchange and union campaigns on issues including asbestos, stress, environmental hazards and new management techniques. **WHIN** provides information on the best union action on health and safety across the globe. It provides the international contacts to help workers effectively address hazards in their workplace, their neighbourhood, their country and across the globe.

The value of this work was recognised in November 1998 when **WHIN** was honoured with the prestigious American Public Health Association (APHA) International Award for "an outstanding achievement in the field of occupational health and safety."

But **WHIN's** work is under threat as a result of an on-going funding crisis. The costs of providing the information service and producing and distributing **WHIN** to labour organisations in 85 countries increases year on year. **WHIN** will not survive without financial support.

If your organisation has the resources, please consider providing a donation to **WHIN**. If you don't subscribe at the moment, take out a subscription. If you have labour contacts abroad, consider paying for their subscription.

Every subscription helps **WHIN** subsidise copies sent to poorly resourced trade unions and labour organisations in the industrialising world.

If you need more information about **WHIN's** work, please contact us at the address below.

Rory O'Neill Simon Pickvance
Editors, *Workers' Health International Newsletter* (WHIN).

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Making occupational health services fit for workers: page 23

