

Cancer in the system



graphic: Michele Chang www.michelechang.com

Unions worldwide are calling for urgent reform at the international agency evaluating workplace and environmental cancer risks, after new evidence revealed it has developed a dangerous industry bias.

The call comes in an October 10 2002 letter from international union bodies ICEM, IFBWW, ITGLWF, IFJ, IUF and TUTB and national union centres in the UK (TUC), Australia (ACTU) and the USA (AFL-CIO).

The letter to Jerry M Rice, chief of the identification and evaluation unit at the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), says: "We are alarmed to read US Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) reports of conflicts of interest, bias toward industry and of questionable evaluation practices at IARC."

The letter adds that union concerns are shared by many

eminent scientists, including Dr James Huff of the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, who headed IARC's programme on evaluating carcinogens from 1977 until 1980 and Dr Lorenzo Tomatis, IARC's director from 1982 to 1993.

"Both are signatories to a February 2002 letter to the World Health Organisation highly critical of IARC for using 'research openly or surreptitiously sponsored by industrial concerns'," the letter says, adding: "As international and national union organisations representing tens of millions of workers worldwide, we call on you to address as a matter of urgency the issues raised by NRDC, particularly its charge that meetings can be dominated by an industry perspective that 'has not historically represented the interests of public health, worker safety, or environmental protection.'"

The union letter concludes:

"We feel at this time it is particularly important IARC distances itself – and is seen to distance itself – from any suggestion of improper corporate influence."

Under Tomatis, the previous head of the unit, the cancer ratings for 38 chemicals were upgraded, and none were downgraded. Under Rice, eight were upgraded and 12 were downgraded.

Ex-IARC head James Huff says in an *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* commentary on IARC's monographs – detailed reviews and assessments of cancer risks – they have been historically "the most authoritative and scientific source," but adds this is no longer the case "due to the increasing influence of those aligned with the industry point of view regarding chemicals and their inert hazards to public and occupational health."

Huff concludes that "the current management seems to pointedly select those who have views favouring the industry positions on key items of economic interest."

His analysis of attendance at meetings discussing the most recent IARC monographs, volumes 62 to 80, found: "In all but one of the Monographs meetings those aligned with industry 'out-numbered' those aligned with public health. Overall, the numbers aligned with public health equal about 76 (29 per cent), those aligned with industry were 83 (32 per cent), and unknown were 99 (38 per cent)."

The bias among observers, who do not vote on final evaluations but "who clearly have considerable influence at the

meetings by participating fully in discussions and subgroup deliberations" was even more marked. "The observers were even more aligned with industry... 69 per cent industry; 12 per cent public health; 20 per cent unknown."

This is not just a matter of chance. NRDC toxicologist Jennifer Sass gives the example of styrene, used in the plastics and rubber industries.

Early this year, Sass discovered that IARC had invited a former employee of the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology to its upcoming styrene meeting. Moreover, IARC had invited – as full voting members – two paid consultants for an industry group, the Styrene Information and Research Center. One of them had been picked to write the crucial literature review, a summary of existing research, and present it to the larger committee.

After NRDC complaints about the "tainted" panel, the two styrene consultants disqualified themselves from voting. And the panel decided to keep styrene's ranking exactly where it was. "We'll never know what would have happened if we hadn't complained about the process," says Sass.

Background
Reform Needed at the International Agency for Research on Cancer, March 13, 2002 Letter to Jerry M. Rice, IARC. See NRDC IARC page: www.nrdc.org/health/effects/iarc/

Letter to Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, director-general, WHO. *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, vol. 8, No. 3, pages 271-273. July/September 2002.

James Huff. *IARC Monographs, Industry influence, and upgrading, downgrading, and under-grading chemicals: A personal viewpoint*. *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, vol. 8, No. 3, pages 249-270. July/September 2002.