

# Labor Occupational Health Program MONITOR



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# Labor Occupational Health Program MONITOR

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## On the Cover:

*A new motion picture dramatizes the life and death of plutonium worker Karen Silkwood. See the review on p.7 (Photo courtesy of 20th Century-Fox.)*

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**Staff:** Robin Baker, LOHP Director; Paul Chown, Labor Center Chairman; Gene Darling, **Monitor** Editor; Anne Maramba-Ferrell; Lela Morris; Brenda Presley; Pat Quinlan; Susan Salisbury; Laura Stock.

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## Annual LOHP Union Activists' Training in September

LOHP will present its Fourth Annual Intensive Training Institute, **Health and Safety in the Workplace**, the week of September 10-14, 1984 at the Institute of Industrial Relations, 2521 Channing Way in Berkeley.

A popular annual September event since 1981, the class will run for five full days, Monday through Friday. There may also be optional evening sessions.

Designed for union officers, shop stewards, business agents, health and safety committee persons, and other members from unions in any industry or occupation, the class will help participants become experts on health and safety within their unions. After the course, unions should be able to call upon the new skills that participants will have learned. Unions are urged, therefore, to select carefully the best person(s) to attend.

Class lectures, combined with skill-building activities, will teach union health and safety activists to identify job hazards, use legal rights, negotiate health and safety contract language, function effectively on a health and safety committee, educate the union membership, and utilize resource agencies in the community.

The \$110.00 per person cost includes five days of instruction, plus training materials. (The cost is \$90.00 each for additional registrants from the same union.)

To enroll, mail full payment, or a \$15.00 non-refundable deposit, to: LOHP, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA 94720. Full payment must be received by Sept. 1. Contact Brenda Presley at LOHP, (415) 642-5507, for more information.



# VDT Roundup

*Following are several short news items about video display terminals which have been condensed from Video Views, the newsletter of the VDT Coalition in the San Francisco Bay Area. This quarterly newsletter offers the latest on VDT health studies, legislative action, union negotiations, and workplace developments. Subscriptions are available for \$5.00 per year from the Coalition, c/o LOHP, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA 94720. Make checks payable to: VDT Coalition.*

## VDT CONFERENCE

• Over 200 San Francisco Bay Area VDT workers attended the VDT Coalition's first conference, **Terminal Illness: VDTs and Worker Health**, on the Berkeley campus April 14th. LOHP co-sponsored the conference. Leading VDT health and safety experts who spoke included Dr. Olov Ostberg, visiting scientist from Sweden working with NIOSH; Dr. Lawrence Stark, Professor of Physiological Optics at U.C. Berkeley and member of the National Academy of Sciences; and Diana Roose of "9 to 5", the National Association of Working Women.

Pam Haynes of the Air Transport Employees and the Los Angeles VDT Taskforce gave an overview of office automation. She emphasized that the introduction of VDTs changes the nature of work in offices, increasing the fragmentation and monotony of work, and placing greater emphasis on quotas and productivity. High levels of stress result, she said, when workload and pace are set not by the user but by the machine.

Dr. Ostberg described Sweden's pioneering 1978 VDT legislation, which he traced to the widespread unionization of white collar workers there. 85% are in unions.

Afternoon workshops dealt with contract negotiation, grievances, workers' compensation suits involving VDTs, and the problems of VDT workers in unorganized workplaces. The conference closed with a discussion of the new California VDT bill, led by Judy Corbett of Assemblyman Tom Hayden's office and Kathleen Kinnick of the California Labor Federation.

## UNITED AIRLINES

• VDT workers at **United Airlines'** San Francisco office have asked NIOSH to investigate an unusual "cluster" of pregnancy problems among women there. 50% of 48 pregnancies since

1970 have resulted in miscarriages and other problems.

"9 to 5", the National Association of Working Women, identified the "cluster" through calls to their national VDT hotline. Thirteen other such "clusters" have been reported in VDT workplaces in the U.S. and Canada over the last four years. Two of these, one in Atlanta and one in Michigan, are also being investigated by NIOSH.

A spokesperson for United Airlines said studies indicate "there is no causal relationship" between VDTs and problem pregnancies. "Because the vast majority of millions of female VDT operators are of reproductive age, clusters of problem pregnancies will appear by statistical chance alone."

But Karen Nussbaum of 9 to 5 said it is "impossible and irresponsible to dismiss the situation without further study."

Diana Roose of 9 to 5 said that "it is better to err on the side of caution while waiting for evidence to come in. Office workers should not have to bear the risk of scientific uncertainty."

## CALIFORNIA VDT BILL

• AB 3175, the **California VDT bill**, has run into legislative obstacles and will not be further considered this year. (See *Monitor*, January-February, 1984, page 4, for an earlier report on the bill.)

After passing the Assembly Ways

and Means Committee on June 6 by a narrow 12-10 margin, the bill was heard by the full Assembly on June 14. The Assembly voted to refer the bill back to its Labor and Employment Committee for study, which effectively ends the chances for further consideration in this session.

The bill had, in any event, emerged from the Ways and Means Committee in a significantly different form. Most of the specific language regulating VDT use had been deleted, and the thrust of the bill became establishment of a state Task Force to study the VDT issue. One feature of the original bill which survived the Ways and Means Committee hearing intact would have required pregnant VDT workers to be given alternative (non-VDT) employment upon request with no loss of pay, benefits, or seniority, if the employer had such a position available. If none were available, the VDT used by the pregnant worker would have to be shielded against nonionizing radiation.

At the June 6 Ways and Means hearing, the bill was opposed by such powerful forces as the California Manufacturers' Association, the American Electronics Association, the California Chamber of Commerce, and IBM.

Labor spokespersons expressed the hope that alternative California legislation might be introduced soon, possibly in a different form.



# Ergonomics Conference Explores Work Design

by **Lela Morris, R.N., M.P.H.**

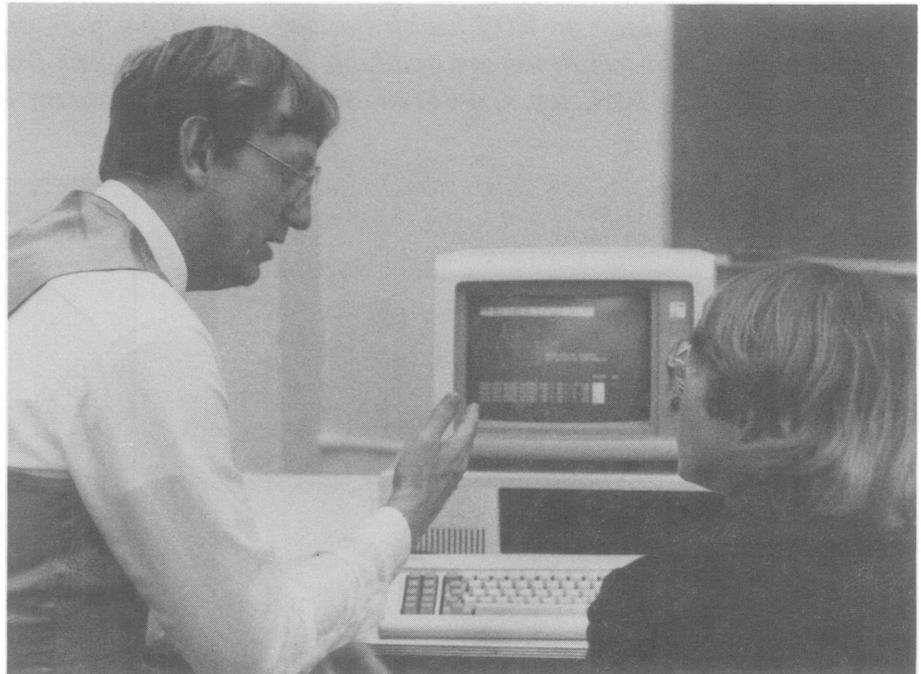
*LOHP Continuing Education  
Coordinator*

On March 8-9, 1984, LOHP co-sponsored a Continuing Education course, **Ergonomics: Human Factors in the Industrial Environment**, at the University of California Extension Center in San Francisco. There were over 50 attendees—health and safety professionals, personnel officers, and insurance representatives.

Course faculty included Don B. Chaffin, Ph.D., Professor and Director, Center for Occupational Health and Safety Engineering, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; and Scott R. Bahr, M.S., Corporate Ergonomist, Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation, Oakland.

In his introductory overview of the subject, Dr. Chaffin offered a historical perspective. Early scientists observed and analyzed human behavior during work, hoping to achieve improvements in productivity. These early pioneers (such as the Americans Frederick Taylor and Frank and Lillian Gilbreath in the early twentieth century) emphasized that human capabilities vary greatly and can be affected favorably or adversely by even small changes in the work setting.

In recent years, ergonomists have become greatly involved in the prevention of chronic disorders, particularly of the musculo-skeletal system. These concerns have brought together physi-



*Don B. Chaffin, Ph.D., University of Michigan, shows class participants the use of an IBM Personal Computer program which aids in ergonomic analysis. (Photo: Patricia Quinlan.)*

ologists, anatomists, and engineers in an attempt to make the physical work environment more compatible with the many varied physical capabilities of work groups.

Other ergonomic topics in the course included “information stress” problems, anthropometry in workplace design, repetitive motion trauma, vibration, heat stress, biomechanical (strength) problems, metabolic energy expenditures, and design of control stations.

Theory was complemented with “real world” case studies.

Instruction was also given in applying the *NIOSH Work Practice Guide for Manual Lifting* for evaluating employee lifting tasks in industry.

*Study materials from the Ergonomics course (and the NIOSH Work Practice Guide) are available from LOHP, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA 94720. Phone LOHP at (415) 642-5507 for more information.*

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## What is Ergonomics?

by **Don B. Chaffin, Ph.D.**

*The following has been adapted from remarks given by Dr. Chaffin at LOHP's recent Ergonomics conference.*

The word “ergonomics” is of Greek origin, meaning the study of work. Since the 1940's, however, the term has developed a more specific definition, the study of humans at work with the intent of understanding the complex interaction of people with various machines, tools, and work methods.

The human body is considered an essential but fragile component in a

larger work system. Ergonomics proposes that to improve the performance of future production systems and to minimize their operating costs, specific knowledge of this man-machine interaction is necessary.

The realization that a special type of knowledge is needed to understand and improve the human work environment is not new. Writers in the early part of this century emphasized how one must carefully observe, measure, and analyze human behavior during work if improvement in productivity is desired. Further, early pioneers such as

Taylor made it clear that human capabilities vary greatly and can be affected for good or bad by even small changes in the work setting.

In the last ten years, ergonomists have become greatly involved in primary prevention of chronic disorders, particularly of the musculo-skeletal system. The subdisciplines of work physiology and occupational biomechanics have developed as part of the field of ergonomics.

Today, ergonomics attempts to provide the scientific basis for designing

*continued on p.5*

## WHAT IS ERGONOMICS?

*continued from p. 4*

the work environment to be compatible and wholesome to a large variety of people. It does this by studying the interaction of people with machines, tools, and work methods to determine how best the interaction can be designed to improve productivity and minimize adverse human suffering as a result of an accident or chronic over-stress. In this sense, cooperative efforts of ergonomists, engineers, industrial hygienists, safety professionals, and occupational nurses and physicians are necessary to develop a better match between worker and job attributes.

Some of the questions with which ergonomists concern themselves are:

- **Information stress.** How does a worker perceive and recognize the stimulus necessary to control a process or operate a mechanism or tool? How does information flow from the environment to the person?
- **Physical stress.** How far can a worker reach? What are his strength and endurance? These questions must be answered to assure the most compatible design of tools, machine control layouts, and workplace arrangements.

Some *informational stress* issues are confusing displays, stimulus-response incompatibility, and skill acquisition

enhancement. A researcher studying *displays*, for example, might evaluate brightness, size of scales, number design, pointer design, use of color coding, and multiple display arrangements on an electric power meter. A related issue would be the clarity of analog versus digital presentation. *Stimulus-response incompatibility* arises when common everyday expectations are not met by equipment. For example, a scale on a meter which decreases in value in the clockwise direction contradicts what we have come to believe—that clockwise means increasing value. A worker in a hurry or under stress may revert back to everyday habits, and an error is predictable. A warning light should be red, not green, or it would contradict everyday expectations. *Skill acquisition enhancement* aims to improve information cues. Controls, for example, may be color-coded or shape-coded.

Two types of *physical stress* are of key importance in ergonomics: anthropometric/biomechanical and metabolic. *Anthropometric* considerations relate to size and reach. The study of human size, mobility, and shape for the purpose of designing products and workplace surroundings is referred to as “engineering anthropometry.” Reach capability studies in the early twentieth century formed the basis for many workplace layouts of today. Likewise, it became necessary to know how a force requirement in a job could affect a worker’s capabilities and health.

These studies have led to the science of “biomechanics.” *Impact biomechanics* addresses the problems resulting from sudden external forces acting on the body, such as in a collision or fall. *Occupational biomechanics* deals with volitional acts such as lifting loads, pushing carts, etc. wherein a person’s musculoskeletal system may be stressed, sometimes frequently.

Both from a worker performance and health and safety standpoint, anthropometric and biomechanical factors must be considered in job design. Simple assumptions about the reach and strength capability of the working population are not acceptable. Data are available on these attributes. The cost of mismatching a job and worker is growing.

When an exertion is repetitive or sustained, the muscular activity required of an individual results in a *metabolic* reaction within muscle cells that requires oxygen and basic food stuffs. Metabolic stress is another type of physical stress. The new discipline of “work physiology” deals with the basis for planning work so that the metabolic requirements of a job do not result in muscular fatigue.

Ergonomics is a growing field which integrates several major disciplines. Only through cooperative efforts of these specialists and industrial managers can ergonomics be applied to help solve the types of problems described here.

### *Pesticide Study*

## Berkeley Research Questions Protective Clothing

New research reported by several University of California, Berkeley health scientists at an April meeting of the American Chemical Society in St. Louis calls into question the effectiveness of protective clothing in preventing pesticide exposure to farmworkers and sprayers.

Industrial hygienist Richard A. Fenske, John Leffingwell, and Professor Robert C. Spear of U.C.’s Department of Biomedical and Environmental Health Sciences studied sprayers near Clear Lake, California using a new detection system for pesticide penetration which they developed. Although the workers wore long pants, shirts, coveralls, boots, hats, rubber gloves, and respirators or

masks, the system found that diazinon, the pesticide used, had penetrated through to the skin in many cases.

The detection system uses a fluorescent whitening agent which is mixed with the pesticide being sprayed. After the spraying, workers remove their clothing and are subjected to ultraviolet light which activates the fluorescence wherever the pesticide has reached the skin. The fluorescence is photographed with a special television camera and the camera image is translated into digital information by a computer.

The computer data show the precise location on the body of pesticide contamination, and relative exposure levels of each skin area. The researchers found

in the Clear Lake study that openings around wrists and necks were the primary penetration points for pesticide droplets.

Two of the researchers reported that they also tested themselves while they sprayed malathion in a citrus grove, with similar results.

The researchers said that their findings raise important questions about the exposure levels that workers actually experience. A larger-scale study, involving termite-control workers, may be conducted soon.

Previous methods of detecting trace pesticide contamination, which used gauze patches pinned to clothing, were highly unreliable, Spear said.



## *Watch Dials*

### **Radium Cleanup at Closed Illinois Plant**

A \$2 million cleanup of radioactive rubble began in late March at the abandoned former plant of Luminous Processes Co. in Ottawa, Illinois. In January, Illinois Governor James Thompson signed legislation providing state funds for the operation.

Luminous Processes, formerly called the Radium Dial Co., opened an Ottawa plant in 1920. Local women were employed to paint watch dials with a luminous paint containing radium. At the time, it was not known that inhaled or swallowed radium goes to the bone, often causing fatal cancers in bone and sinus tissues. Nor was it known that exposure can cause breast cancer. In 1937, Radium Dial Co. was forced to shut down after the deaths of a dozen women workers were traced to sloppy safety measures at the plant.

Later, Argonne National Laboratory attributed 30 deaths to practices at the

plant in the 1920-37 period. Some former workers place the death toll at over 40. Other former plant workers are still alive, but have a variety of tumors.

A casual attitude toward radium prevailed in those years. Former workers told of playing with radium, painting it on their teeth and lips for fun. Paintbrush tips were brought to a fine point by licking them.

After the 1937 closure, Radium Dial changed its name to Luminous Processes and moved to a newer building, the building now abandoned and being cleaned up by Chem-Nuclear Systems, Inc. Supposedly, new safety measures were instituted at the time of the move, but former workers told of company practices such as removing the fingers from protective gloves to allow faster work. A lower, but still above-normal, rate of cancer deaths continued among

the workers. The plant finally closed in 1978 when the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission shut it down for excessive employee radiation exposure and insufficient protective measures.

The Illinois Dept. of Nuclear Safety last summer found that radiation levels in parts of the closed plant were 8000 times above acceptable limits, although it had been abandoned for five years. On the sidewalk outside, some radiation levels were ten times above acceptable limits.

"I won't walk past it. All the cleaning in the world won't get it out," said one former employee. Someone has spray-painted on the south wall of the closed plant, "Dial Luminous for Death."

*—Compiled from Chicago Tribune and other sources*

## *Dan River*

### **Cotton Dust Standard Waived for Textile Firm**

Dan River, Inc., a large textile firm headquartered in Danville, Virginia, was granted a variance by Virginia state health and safety officials in May, 1984, which will allow it to exceed federal and state cotton dust exposure limits.

In late 1983, the company petitioned the state to exempt it temporarily from provisions of federal OSHA's new cotton dust standard which require engineering controls such as ventilation systems to be installed in the industry by March 27, 1984. (Since Virginia is one of several states which OSHA has approved to run state health and safety programs, it has the authority to approve such variances.)

Dan River told Virginia authorities it sought the temporary waiver in order to conduct a research study in its plants. The proposed study, to be conducted by researchers from the Medical University of South Carolina and Clemson University, would test a theory that byssinosis (brown lung disease) is caused by bacteria or some other agent in cotton dust rather than the dust alone. In

order for the study to succeed, company officials said, the cotton dust level must be kept high in the plants for the duration of the research.

Prior to his recent resignation, former federal OSHA head Thorne Auchter endorsed the study. Auchter told Virginia authorities it had "the potential for making a significant contribution," and he supported Dan River's request for a variance.

However, other OSHA officials were less positive about the proposed study. Susan Harwood of OSHA's health standards section said that the researchers selected had not published their previous work on the topic in scientific journals or subjected it to the scrutiny of the scientific community; that "human experimentation" is involved; and that the study should not be used as a device for "escaping the compliance deadlines."

Labor's reaction was even more critical. Margaret Seminario of the AFL-CIO's Health and Safety Department said that it is "outrageous that federal

OSHA has helped to engineer this thing to get Dan River a variance, which amounts to an exemption." Eric Frumin, Safety Director of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, said the study is a "convenient excuse" to delay installing engineering controls. In a letter to federal OSHA requesting a review of the Virginia decision, ACTWU President Murray H. Finley said Dan River is being allowed to "defy the intent" of the cotton dust standard and that Auchter's support of the variance was "utterly incredible" and "reprehensible." Finley added that most other textile mills installed engineering controls well in advance of the March, 1984 deadline.

Virginia has given Dan River until July 1 to submit a grant proposal to NIOSH for funding of the study. The variance will end if NIOSH does not fund it by November 1.

*—Compiled from BNA Occupational Safety & Health Reporter and other sources*

# *Silkwood*: Realistic, But Not the Whole Story

by Tom Ferrell

*United Transportation Union  
Local 1469*

**Silkwood**; a 20th Century-Fox film. Directed by Mike Nichols. Written by Nora Ephron and Alice Arlen. With Meryl Streep, Kurt Russell, Cher, and Susie Bond. 1983.

The story is well-known to most of us by now. Karen Silkwood, 28, mother of three, died in a car wreck on a dark Oklahoma highway in 1974, under circumstances tangled in controversy.

Kerr-McGee Corporation, which employed Silkwood at its Cimarron nuclear plant, argues that she passed out from the combined effects of quaaludes and alcohol. The company has also said that she had earlier deliberately exposed herself to plutonium (one of the most toxic substances which has ever existed on earth) to dramatize alleged health and safety violations at the fuel-rod plant where she worked and organized.

However, Kerr-McGee itself has been held liable in the Oklahoma courts for Silkwood's contamination. A \$10 million judgment against the company was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in January, 1984, in a suit filed by Silkwood's relatives. As for the "accident," substantial evidence was uncovered by an experienced crash investigator retained by Silkwood's union (the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers) which indicated that her car was rammed from behind.

Was Karen Silkwood murdered? At the time of the wreck, it is known that she was en route to a meeting with a reporter from the *New York Times*, carrying documentation of dangerous practices at the plant. Oklahoma police claim no documents were found in her car.

Mike Nichols' new film *Silkwood* repeats this familiar story, but the film is equivocal on the key questions. Nor does Nichols have anything to say on the FBI's role in the subsequent alleged "coverup."

OCAW's Steve Wodka, who was waiting with the *Times* reporter for Silkwood that night, faults the movie also for distorting the union's role in the struggle for worker health and safety



Photo courtesy of 20th Century-Fox.

at Kerr-McGee. Wodka writes: "The real story is one of a classic battle between a small but tough local union and a huge, vehemently anti-union company. . . But the film portrays the local union leadership as a collection of inarticulate hillbillies. In reality, the local union officials were principled, sophisticated, and committed to trade union ideals."

## PERSONAL STORY

Instead, the focus of the film is on Karen Silkwood's *personal* trials. We see her transformation from a rowdy working-class nonconformist (a refugee from the filthy air of Texas panhandle oil refineries) into a single-minded union activist, health investigator, and anti-nuclear rebel. Is Meryl Streep's portrayal true to the "real" Silkwood? Streep's Silkwood is unglamorous and believable, and the story, however fictionalized, is compelling.

But what's best about the movie is its picture of the dirty realities of the supposedly high-tech nuclear industry. The film exposes the old "jobs versus health" con game that companies play, and it shows the speedups and petty harrassments.

We see that there is really extraordinary danger to nuclear industry workers. *Silkwood's* most striking scene

occurs when an older worker, Thelma (played by Susie Bond), is contaminated. Her daughter is dying of lung cancer. We see her complete terror as the alarm bells ring and she is subjected to a painful shower and scrub.

At another point, Silkwood's lover Drew remarks (while chain-smoking): "Hell, if anybody around here's gonna get cancer, we're *all* gonna get cancer." The comment typifies the fatalistic attitude Silkwood rejected, at significant personal cost.

As Silkwood's investigations continue, her home is suspiciously found to be contaminated. She drives up to find that a clean-up team has gutted her home's interior and is carting away her furniture and personal effects in plastic bags. Kerr-McGee's suggestion that she deliberately spiked her own bologna to call attention to health and safety issues seems ridiculous in light of scenes like these.

All in all, although the film may not be true to all the facts of the Silkwood case, and although it steers around controversy, it is a vivid portrayal of nuclear industry conditions and of the development of a courageous union activist. For more information on the Silkwood case, contact the Karen Silkwood Fund, 1324 N. Capitol St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20002.

## *Refusal to Work*

# PG&E Lineman Wins PCB Case

In an April, 1984 decision by the Santa Rosa office of the California Labor Commissioner, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. (PG&E) was ordered to reinstate with back pay a lineman it had fired in January for refusing to clean up a PCB spill in Sonoma.

The lineman, Al Simontacchi, had earlier been suspended twice—in early 1980 and late 1983—for similar refusals. His 1980 refusal was one of the first in a series of refusals to handle PCBs by workers at the Northern California power company. For example, six San Jose PG&E workers were suspended and warned by the company in June, 1980 under similar circumstances. The Labor Commissioner's office at that time ordered the suspensions and disciplinary warning letters reversed. (*See Monitor, September-October, 1980, page 10.*)

Simontacchi, like the other PG&E workers, based his refusals on the argument that he had been given neither adequate training nor proper protective equipment to do the job safely.

Simontacchi is a member of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1245. The union has also filed a grievance over his dismissal, which is proceeding through the grievance machinery. PG&E has refused to comply with the Labor Commissioner's April decision, and will be sued by the Commissioner to enforce the order on behalf of Simontacchi.

Either the grievance or the lawsuit could eventually result in Simontacchi's reinstatement; meanwhile he has temporary employment with another electric utility.

(In the 1980 cases involving the six PG&E workers in San Jose, PG&E also refused to comply with the Labor Commissioner's order reversing the discipline, and the Labor Commissioner also sued the company. Before that case could come to trial, arbitrator Armon Barsamian, in a strongly worded decision, ruled in the workers' favor on a grievance that Local 1245 had filed.)

## OTHER ISSUES

In his case with the Labor Commissioner's office, Simontacchi was represented by Dr. Leo Seidlitz of Berkeley, who also represented the six PG&E workers in 1980. In the April hearing in Santa Rosa, Simontacchi and Seidlitz argued that the company had violated both Sections 6310 and 6311 of the California Labor Code. Section 6311, which normally is used in such cases, prohibits retaliation against employees who refuse to perform unsafe work. But Simontacchi and Seidlitz argued that, in this case, Section 6310 applied also. This section prohibits retaliation for previous, protected health and safety activity, and the argument was that PG&E retaliated by *assigning*

Simontacchi a PCB spill in light of his earlier complaints about PCBs. The Labor Commissioner's decision found violations of both Labor Code sections, and Seidlitz said he believes this is the first case in which both were found to have been violated.

Another issue in the April case involved pay for witnesses. PG&E paid all employees, both management and workers, who testified for the company, but it docked the pay of all employees who testified on behalf of Simontacchi. After complaints were filed, the Commissioner's office ruled that docking pay in such circumstances constituted illegal discrimination in violation of Section 6310, and ordered the witnesses' wages to be paid. PG&E has also refused to obey this order, leading to further legal action against the company by the Labor Commissioner.

Simontacchi has also filed a complaint against the Labor Commissioner's office with federal OSHA (a CASPA, or Complaint Against State Program Administration), alleging that the Santa Rosa office acted improperly in initially attempting to discourage him from issuing subpoenas for the hearing to his coworkers.

Simontacchi is a founder of the nationwide PCB Project, a publicity and advocacy group. For more information, call the PCB Project at (707) 938-2099 or Dr. Seidlitz at (415) 527-7488.

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