

# VIDEO VIEWS

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THE VDT COALITION

Spring 1984

## Nearly 200 Attend VDT Conference

Over 200 people attended the April 14 conference, "Terminal Illness: VDTs and Worker Health," co-sponsored by the VDT Coalition and the Labor Occupational Health Program. The conference brought together VDT workers, union activists, and leading VDT health and safety experts to discuss health hazards associated with VDT use and strategies for improving VDT working conditions.

The morning session opened with an overview of the impact of office automation presented by Pam Haynes of the Air Transport Employees and the Los Angeles VDT Taskforce. When an office is automated, she said, the very nature of the work is drastically changed. VDT work is often fragmented and monotonous. The increased emphasis on quotas and productivity can lead to high levels of stress, particularly when the work load and pace is determined not by the user but by the machine. "The U.S.," she said, "has the ability to create technological miracles but tends to forget the human factor. Our society puts more emphasis on productivity than on the quality of our work environments. In that sense our country is underdeveloped."

Dr. Olov Ostberg, visiting scientist from Sweden working with NIOSH, reported that Sweden, with its widespread unionization (90-95% of blue collar workers are in unions as are 85% of white collar workers) is a front runner in awareness of the "human factor." In 1978 Sweden was responsible for the first VDT legislation.

Dr. Lawrence Stark, Professor of Physiological Optics at UC Berkeley and member of the National Academy of Sciences, spoke of vision problems facing VDT users. He reviewed common symptoms of eyestrain and fatigue, such as burning, itchy, tearing eyes and pointed

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## VDT Bill Passes First Committee

California Assembly Bill 3175 which would provide safeguards for video display terminal workers overcame its first hurdle on April 3 after a lively hearing before the Assembly Labor and Employment Committee. The measure was passed by a vote of 7 to 4 and on May 23 goes to the Assembly Ways and Means Committee where the dollar and cents issues will be argued.

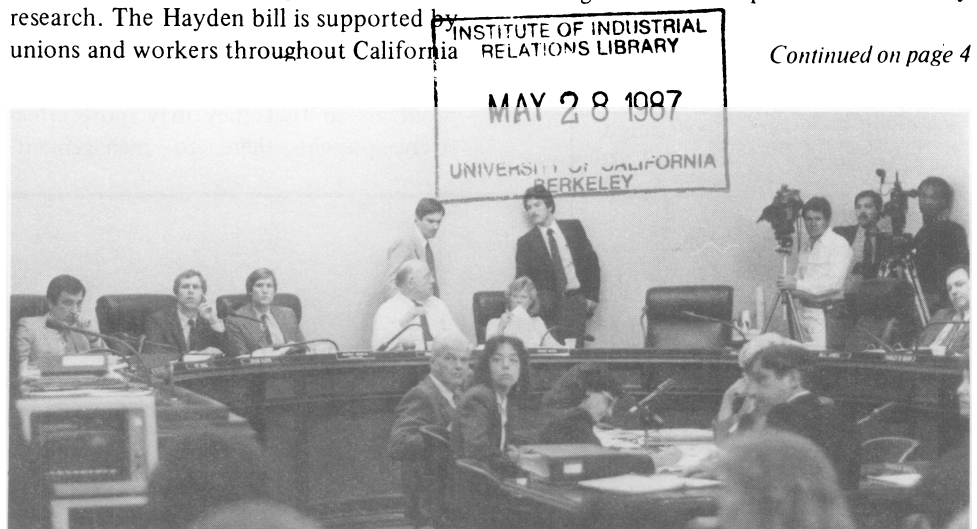
The bill, authored by Democratic Assemblyman Tom Hayden, sets minimum standards for video display terminals and calls for improvements in the workplace to correct health and safety problems facing VDT users. The bill would mandate proper lighting, glare control measures, contrast and brightness controls, wrist and foot rests, adjustable chairs and tables, detachable keyboards, tiltable screens, employer paid eye examinations, and rest breaks to relieve visual strain and stress. The bill also gives pregnant women the right to transfer to non-VDT work, requires radiation shielding, regular terminal maintenance and monitoring of radiation research. The Hayden bill is supported by unions and workers throughout California

and sponsored by the California Labor Federation.

After AB 3175 passed that committee, Assemblywoman Sally Tanner, D-Los Angeles, decided to drop a weaker version of the bill she was carrying that would have provided safeguards only for state employees. Her decision gave the Hayden measure the support of the California State Employees Association.

Testimony at the four hour hearing covered a wide range of health and safety issues. In his opening remarks, Assemblyman Hayden quoted researchers at Harvard Medical School who state, "the VDT is not just another piece of office equipment. It changes the nature of the work people do. Most potential health problems caused by VDTs can probably be averted by planning that takes account of operators' needs." Testifying for the bill was David Eisen, Research and Information Director of the Newspaper Guild, who said, "people who deprecate the health problems associated with VDTs say there is no evidence of long-term eye damage." But he quoted VDT safety

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*At the Labor and Employment Committee hearing, witnesses arguing for passage of AB 3175, in the foreground, are looking at a VDT (left). They include (left to right) John Henning, chief of California's AFL-CIO, Laura Stock, of the VDT Coalition, and looking over his shoulder, Assemblyman Tom Hayden, who authored the bill.*

## Letters

I worked on a video display terminal for about nine months before I finally had to resign because of the eye pain I was experiencing. My eyes felt tired and strained as soon as I woke up in the morning; they hurt more and more as I used them during the day; and at night all I could do was sit with my eyes closed. It seemed like a million pins were sticking into my eyes all the time. Frequently, the side of one of my eyes felt like it was tearing or ripping.

I went to three different ophthalmologists who said they could find nothing physically wrong with my eyes. The doctors could offer no treatment to help alleviate the pain. Their only suggestion was to stop working on the video display terminal.

It has been over three months since I worked on the display terminal. My eyes do feel better. They do not hurt as much nor tire as quickly as before. However, they do feel tired by midafternoon everyday, and it's very uncomfortable to read or write or do any close work for very long. I have to stop after 20-30 minutes.

I would like to know if any readers have found any treatment which helps alleviate the eye strain caused by working on a video display terminal. I have read about eye exercises which are recommended by some optometrists. If anyone has tried such eye exercises, I would like to know if they helped. It's really discouraging that the medical profession seems to know so little about this new problem. Any information any of you can provide about eye treatment will be greatly appreciated.

J. Robinson

## VDT Conference

*Continued from page 1*

out that "though eye fatigue cannot be measured it is a very real problem." Dr. Stark suggested that eye exercises such as focusing on a distant object and brief vision breaks may bring temporary relief of eyestrain.

Diana Roose of "9 to 5," National Association of Working Women, reviewed the current controversy about the relationship between VDTs and reproductive problems. Though a link between the two has not been proven, the number of reported "clusters" of pregnancy problems among VDT operators has led to a high level of concern. She reviewed potential causes of these problems, including stress, environmental pollution and radiation. Until more research into this problem is completed she suggested pregnant workers can take the following precautionary measures: requesting a job transfer; reducing stress on the job through controlling work pace and taking regular breaks; and installing a metal shield in the terminals to block possible radiation emissions.

Afternoon workshops were designed to give VDT users the chance to develop specific and realistic plans for improving their work environments. Union activists shared their experiences using contract negotiation, grievances and workers compensation suits to address the VDT problem. Unorganized workers discussed the formation of support groups and doing worksite inspections and employee surveys to document VDT-related problems so that they may more effectively present them to management.

The afternoon session also included a speakout where participants told of their experiences working on terminals and organizing to improve their working conditions. The conference closed with a presentation by Judy Corbett of Assemblyman Tom Hayden's office and Kathleen Kinnick of the California Labor Federation about the status of the California VDT bill. Ms. Kinnick discussed the important role the VDT Coalition has played in gathering information about VDT hazards and in supporting efforts to protect worker health and safety. "Though improving individual job situations is crucial," she said, "It is essential that all California workers work together to ensure that legislation is passed that will provide protection for all workers."

## VDT Emits Mystery Fumes

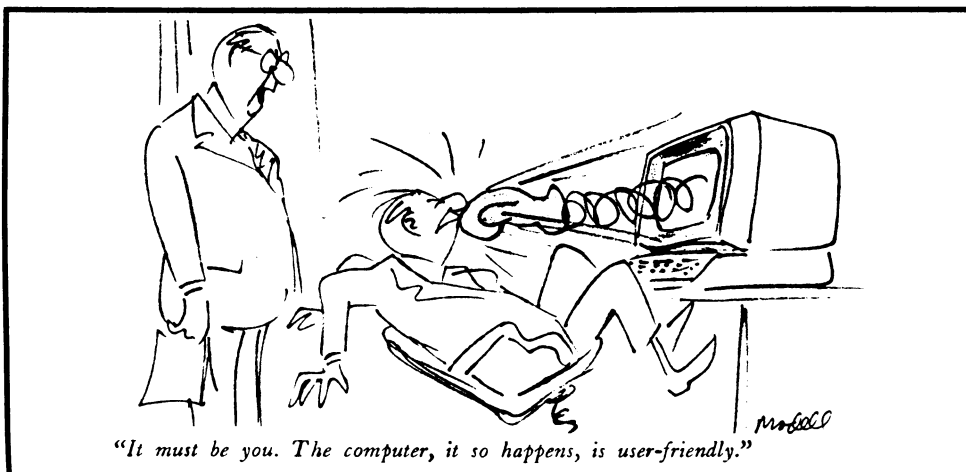
*The following is adapted from a report by Beth Kean and Roberta Hipolito, printed in The 29er, May 1984, newsletter of OPEU, Local 29.*

On Friday, October 7, 1983, fumes were apparently released from a CRT at Blue Cross in Oakland, California, making many employees sick and causing management to send the entire floor's staff home for the rest of the day. The nature and cause of the fumes are still unknown.

That morning several employees who sit near each other in a VDT area noticed an unusual odor which resembled paint thinner or nail polish. At the same time they noticed one of their CRTs had gone totally blank. Maintenance personnel came and removed the CRT.

By early afternoon, about 15 employees in the immediate area had headaches. Three or more workers had to be given oxygen. Several had to be taken from the area in wheelchairs. Other complaints ranged from nausea and dizziness to sore throats and numbness of the skin. By 3:15 pm, management sent everyone home for the day.

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*"It must be you. The computer, it so happens, is user-friendly."*

# United Airlines Employees Report Problem Pregnancies

Telephone sales representatives at United Airlines' San Francisco office have asked the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to investigate their workplace after 50% of 48 pregnancies occurring since 1970 resulted in miscarriages and other problems.

The United Airlines worksite is made up of more than 300 people, most of them women, using VDTs for 8 to 10 hours a day. The problem pregnancies included 15 miscarriages, one stillbirth, one neonatal death, two premature births, and two children with birth defects. 9 to 5, National Association of working women identified this "cluster" when employees contacted their national VDT hotline. 9 to 5 is working with the United Airlines workers in filing a request for a NIOSH Health Hazard Evaluation of their workplace. As of this writing, NIOSH has completed an initial site visit and will be returning to do a more complete epidemiological study.

A United Airlines spokesperson told the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper that 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." Karen Nussbaum, of 9 to 5, said the evidence at United Airlines "makes it impossible and irresponsible to dismiss the situation without further study."

This United Airlines cluster of pregnancies is one of 14 that have been reported in the U.S. and Canada over the last four years. Two of these clusters, one in Atlanta and one in Michigan, are also being investigated by NIOSH. According to Laura Stock of the VDT Coalition, "the cause of these pregnancy problems is unknown. Possible explanations include the high levels of stress experienced by many VDT operators, the physical immobility accompanying VDT work, environmental toxins in the general office environment, the possibility of

emissions of low levels of radiation, and mere statistical chance."

Groups such as the VDT Coalition and 9 to 5 are calling for more research into the relationship between VDTs and reproduction. A number of such studies are being planned. NIOSH is currently seeking a population for a three year project in which they will investigate the pregnancy outcomes of 3,000 women, 1,500 of whom will be VDT operators. NIOSH hopes to establish whether or not there is, in fact, a higher rate of pregnancy problems among VDT workers, than among other non-VDT workers. Similar studies are being undertaken in Sweden and in Canada.

Because such studies will take several years to complete, many groups are recommending more immediate measures to allay VDT workers' concerns. A number of unions, such as CWA of Canada and District 65, UAW, have succeeded in negotiating job transfers for pregnant workers. Also, in 1978, Canada's Ministry of Labor recommended that pregnant women be given non-VDT work without a cut in pay. Other unions have won provisions mandating radiation shielding and monitoring. In California the VDT safety bill introduced by Assemblyman Tom Hayden, would give pregnant employees the right to job

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Newsletter Committee: Margaret Binkley, Rachel Blau, Patti Larsen, Elaine Reed, Jeanne Robinson, Mari Faith Ross, Emily Siegal, Laura Stock. Thanks to Cathy Davis.

transfer, mandate metal shielding against non-ionizing radiation, regular terminal maintenance, and monitoring of radiation research.

(See article in this issue for other provisions of this bill.)

Such protective measures for VDT workers are supported by such groups as the VDT Coalition and 9 to 5. According to Diana Roose, Research Director of 9 to 5, "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."

## Bargaining for Safety

The following are examples of contract language concerning pregnancy transfer.

**From District 65, UAW, and the *Village Voice*, a New York based newspaper:**

"No pregnant workers will be required to use VDTs. At her request, a pregnant worker will be offered any vacant job available if she is qualified to perform that work, without loss of seniority."

**From Communications Workers of Canada and Bell Canada:**

"... where a pregnant employee is deeply concerned about such issues, she will be obliged to act according to what she sees as the best course for her unborn child."

**Service Employees International Union 390/400 and City of San Francisco:**

"The Board of Supervisors shall encourage each department to adopt the following policy: Upon request, a pregnant employee shall have the right to be assigned duties away from video display equipment or to be temporarily appointed to another position for the duration of pregnancy."

## VDT Bill

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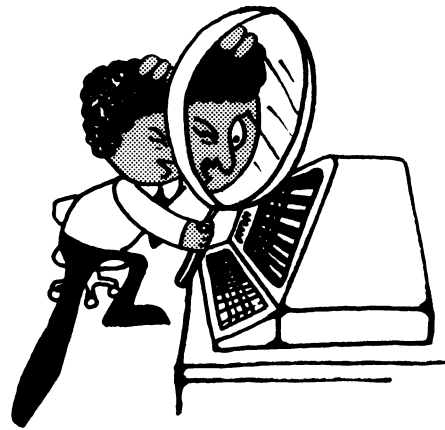
expert, Dr. Michael Smith of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), who contends that, "the reason there is no such evidence one way or the other is that no one has yet done any long term research."

Also testifying in support of the bill was Karen Nussbaum of 9 to 5, National Association of Working Women, who spoke of the need for protection for pregnant VDT workers in the face of as yet unexplained clusters of pregnancy problems among VDT operators. John Henning and Kathleen Kinnick, of the California Labor Federation, attested to the strong support labor organizations have given the bill, evidenced by the large numbers of unions and workers attending the hearing. Technical information was provided by Laura Stock of the Labor Occupational Health Program who noted that a 1980 NIOSH study found that VDT users experience higher levels of stress than any other group of workers ever studied.

Opponents of AB 3175, including representatives from IBM, Hewlett Packard, and the California Chamber of Commerce, argued that there is not enough evidence to justify the provisions of the bill and also expressed concern about the financial burden the measure would have on the business community. Dr. Gilbert Reese, president of the California Association of Ophthalmologists, presented his organizations' opposition to the bill saying that the evidence indicates that, under normal use, VDTs

do not pose a hazard to the vision of VDT workers.

But the testimony of the opposition failed to convince VDT users and union representatives who squeezed into the packed hearing room. One of them, Lori Freeman, a VDT operator and member of the Communication Workers of America, testified for the bill. She stated, "I need glasses now; I didn't need them before." She also said she suffers from headaches three to four times a week, has a stiff neck and a pain between her shoulders. "I go to a chiropractor three to four times a week." In her office, workers are given basic secretarial chairs which are supposed to be adjustable but which would require a "set of tools to make them work." There are no foot rests and her working position is fixed.



Another woman testified, "A year and a half ago I was pregnant." Though her pregnancy appeared to be normal and the baby healthy, she gave birth to a still-born. "It died a week before I delivered. I want an answer. They said they couldn't

find a reason for that baby to die."

AB 3175 now goes to the Assembly Ways and Means Committee for a hearing on May 23. If it passes that committee it will be on its way to a vote by the full Assembly. Hayden's office suggests that that best way to get the measure over its next hurdles is to write, call and visit legislators and let them know how important it is to the 750,000 VDT workers in California that the measure become law.

### POSTSCRIPT

On May 23, the VDT bill was heard by the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. After testimony for and against the measure was heard, final vote was postponed for two weeks. This postponement will allow Assemblyman Hayden to discuss the bill with committee members and to review possible amendments. Proposed amendments will also be presented to the California Labor Federation and representatives of labor organizations that have been mobilizing support for this measure.

## Mystery Fumes

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Since the accident, the health and safety committee of Office and Professional Employees, Local 29 has been trying to get information about the nature of the substance which was emitted. Using the California Right to Know Law, the union obtained copies of reports filled out by the nearly 50 employees who became ill or were affected by the odor. They also received, through Blue Cross, a statement issued by the VDT provider stating that there were no PCBs present in the machine. This had been a concern because many older CRTs have been found to contain PCBs, polychlorinated biphenyls, which are linked to a wide range of health problems from skin rashes to cancer. PCB use in VDT manufacturing was banned in 1980.

The health and safety committee met with the VDT Coalition to discuss further action and plans to contact the VDT manufacturer and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in an attempt to obtain information about what chemicals are used in manufacturing VDTs.

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