

VIDEO VIEWS

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Real Experts Tell Their Stories

MAY 28 1987

VDT Speakout a Big Success

Statistical Fluke or a Link

New Swedish Study on Radiation



Workers share their share their stories at VDT "Speak out."

By Larkie Gildersleeve & Barbara Elspas

Organization is the best way to ensure the health and safety of VDT workers, was the consensus reached by the more than 75 VDT users attending the VDT Coalition "Speakout" in downtown San Francisco. During the February 7th event, VDT users voiced concerns and offered testimony about health problems, stress and job loss associated with computer jobs. "We hope to create an atmosphere and a situation where we the real experts have an opportunity to tell our policy makers what kinds of problems we have and what changes should be made," said Jean Miller, a Speak Out organizer and member of OPEIU, Local 3, at the beginning of the Speak Out.

The panel invited to listen to the speakers included: San Francisco Supervisor Nancy Walker; Oakland City Council Member Wilson Riles, Jr.; Teamsters lobbyist and CalOSHA Standards member, Gerald O'Hara; Berkeley Vice Mayor Veronika Fukson; Assemblyman Tom Hayden's aide, Judy Corbett; US Representative Barbara Boxer's aide, Sue Ellen

Thompson; and Oakland Tribune columnist Brenda Payton.

Laura Stock, VDT Coalition coordinator, said that visual and musculoskeletal problems and stress are the most common complaints of VDT users. Her remarks were confirmed by more than 15 people who took the microphone and described their experiences.

A legal secretary who has used a VDT for more than five years said, "I come home, I feel tense, tired and at the same time it is hard to get to sleep. Since working this job my eyes are more irritated." She said she found it difficult to insist on more rest breaks away from the VDT because her employers are so friendly to the workers. "It's really hard to speak out when your employers are nice to you." An administrative assistant from a social service agency also felt stuck. "What can you do when it's your living?"

A hospital registration worker who suffers from tension, depression and burning and tearing eyes at night said, "I though it was the pillow. My doctors said it was possible that it was from the VDT, but a lot of doctors don't want to admit it." (Continued on page 2)

In January, 1986, Swedish newspapers published the results of a new study linking pulsed magnetic fields, like those emitted by VDTs, to abnormalities in mice embryos.

This is not the first study to point to a connection between low levels of non-ionizing radiation and fetal development. A 1982 Spanish study, and a more recent Finnish study, concluded that weak pulsed magnetic fields influenced the development of chicken embryos. A number of questions have arisen about these studies. (1.) Can these results be transferred from animals to humans? (2.) Are these magnetic field pulses similar to those emitted by VDTs?

The latest Swedish study by the national Institute of Radiation Protection presents results which could link VDT-type radiation and reproductive effects. The study showed that mice embryos exposed to the highest level of radiation appeared to have more malformations than a control non-exposed group. In addition, Swedish researchers are also studying a new Polish report which provided additional evidence of a VDT/reproduction connection. This study found that magnetic field radiation can adversely affect testicles in male rats.

Though the validity of transferring results from animals to humans is open to question, these findings have increased concern that VDT-type radiation could be hazardous to human reproduction. According to Rickardo Edstrom, Chief physician at the Swedish Occupational Safety Administration, which together with the Institute of Radiation Protection carried out the research, "There's a big step between animals and humans, especially in terms of body size, but the findings mean we can no longer rule out the possibility that radiation could affect fetuses"

In the U.S., the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

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Experts Speak

(Continued from page 1)

A typography shop manager who is losing vision in one eye said, "Doctors don't know what it is. I know it's the VDT because when I get away from it for three or four days, I start to see better and the redness goes away."

Another legal secretary became seriously concerned about VDT effects when she had to arrange for a co-worker to be taken to a hospital emergency room for dizziness and blurry vision. "I talked to a couple of other people . . . 'oh, yeah,' they said, 'a stress attack.' Four people I know in our firm have had a stress attack. I wonder what goes on to cause such terrible symptoms."

A computer programmer said that "after a few weeks of working constantly on my terminal, I lost feeling in my little finger. I thought it was my desk. I realized it was from being in one position for a long period of time."

Another worker said the lighting in her office was so bright that workers routinely bring "umbrellas to hang above them to keep the glare from being so bad."

Larkie Gildersleeve, a Speak Out organizer and Northern California Newspaper Guild Administrative Officer, said there is also a possibility that VDTs may cause skin problems. She said a worker she talked to recently had developed a skin rash on her face that she had never had before using a VDT.

Gildersleeve said that some employers use the computer to monitor employees' work. This surveillance contributes to workers' stress and anxiety, and is a form of work "speed-up."

A Stanford University researcher pointed out that "it is very easy to attribute subtle symptoms to yourself, and not to the equipment you're using."

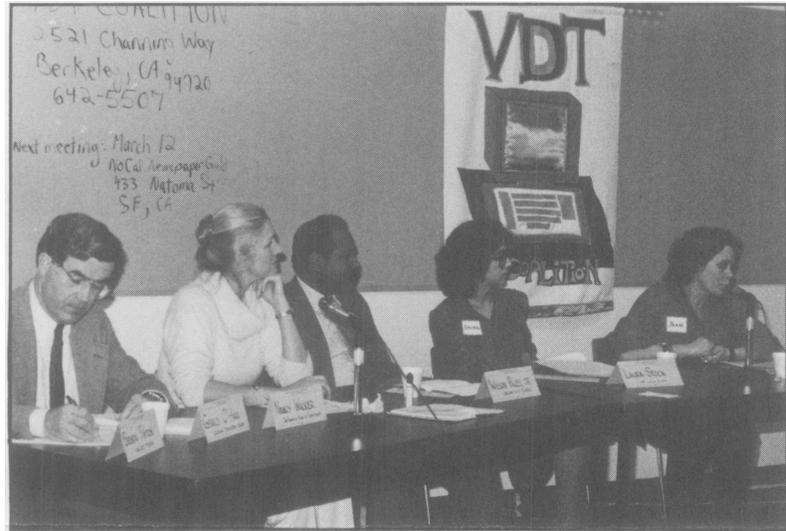
The panelists seemed impressed with the need to improve VDT working conditions. O'Hara urged people to bring their concerns to CalOSHA, although he acknowledged that previous efforts to obtain standards had not succeeded. Fukson said the city council could provide a public forum but changes and improvements should come from employees and their unions. She said the city could bring medical problems of VDT users to the attention of the medical community in the process of negotiating health packages. Riles said the Oakland City Council could set standards for VDT equipment

and user working conditions. "This is something we'll bring up and deal with," he said. "This is do-able in Oakland."

Organization was frequently cited as the best solution to VDT related problems. According to Miller, "Through our unions and associations we need to carry the message of our health concerns and other problems to our employer. We need to negotiate protections." It was also agreed that non-union workers also need to organize, if only in a work group, to

identify their needs and possible solutions to present to their employer.

According to Pete Rockwell, member of Bay Area Typographical Union and one of the organizers of the Speak Out, "The event couldn't have been better than it was. It's clear that this is an issue of major importance and that people are ready and willing to fight for the changes they need." Anyone interested in viewing a videotape of this event can call (415) 642-5507.



Gerald O'Hara, CalOSHA Standards Board; Nancy Walker, San Francisco Supervisor; Wilson Riles Jr., Oakland City Council; Laura Stock, VDT Coalition; Jean Miller, VDT Coalition, OPEU Local 3.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Video Views:

I am angry and I plan to do everything in my power to remedy this situation.

For the past year, I have been running from doctor to doctor listening to each one try and explain why I suffer from headaches. I have taken all sorts of medication they have prescribed and listened to all sorts of advice, only to still have pain. However, last week I finally found a clue to the source of my discomfort.

It appeared in a small article found in the San Francisco Business Journal about the hazards of VDTs, and it states that one of the health hazards was headaches.

This was not the first time an article appeared on this subject. My company, United Airlines, has been cited in quite a few because of the alarming number of birth defects and miscarriages. There is also an incredible number of people suffering from headaches.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health visited United Airlines and conducted a sham of a test. Quite honestly, from all accounts I haven't a notion what they tested. They handed out questionnaires primarily dealing with pregnancy, thereby excluding the male population. They never actually tested the VDTs for radiation because, according to Dr. Peter Lichty (the medical officer in charge of the investigation), it would have been a big deal for the United Airlines Company to fly a couple of techs and equipment to San Francisco. A big deal for an airline to fly passengers and freight, give me a break.

As I stated above in the opening of this letter, I am angry, and my anger is spreading once again to my fellow co-workers. We will not stand for household appliances having more regulations and warnings than VDTs. We will not allow the human factor and well being of employees to be lost because it is "big deal" to do otherwise. Must someone get runover first before they put a stop light in!

Signed, a worker of United Airlines,
with support of co-workers

Airline Worker Speaks Out About Her Job

By Anne Gordon

Pacific Southwest Airlines (PSA) spends over one million dollars a year to convince consumers that they are purchasing service-with-a-smile, but that cheery maxim is not quite true, as Toni Watson reported at the recent VDT Coalition Speak Out. Watson is a PSA reservations sales agent. "To tell the truth," said Watson in her moving and at times horrifying testimony, "we don't feel much like smiling at all in the reservations center."

Each day Watson and her co-workers plug into a computer system which monitors many aspects of their performance for the entire day. In fact, says Watson, "We punch in and out of three units: the timeclock, the VDT, and the telephone keypad known as 'Collins.' We plug a phone jack into Collins which is attached to our headsets and receive telephone calls. The VDT and Collins track every micro-second of our workday on computerized performance records." Daily print-outs are produced on each worker's performance. Weekly print-outs map each agent's sales and production quotas as well.

In addition, agents are monitored on their "call length time." Watson described the meaning and process of this measurement. "When someone calls PSA, we have 106 seconds to process your call, complete business and take the next call on hold. This is the office standard. To the salesperson who was hired because of 'people-oriented abilities,' this does not give one a lot of time to be friendly and personable."

To insure that this procedure is complied with, there is a "Quality Assurance" staff. These people secretly monitor the calls between the agents and the customers. If they don't like the way a call is handled, they write you up? Agents are written up if they do not pursue a sale aggressively enough or do not take enough calls per hour. Watson explained, "They continue to monitor your performance and if you do not improve to their satisfaction, they start issuing warnings which can lead to job loss."

This type of Orwellian nightmare is only half of the story. Workers are also checked for "unplugged time." Watson



described the typical workday with two paid 15-minute breaks, and 30 minutes, unpaid, for lunch. For the remaining seven and one half hours, employees are "only allowed to leave their positions for 12 minutes per day. "This includes bathroom breaks, rest breaks, walking breaks, talking to co-workers — everything! We are expected to be seated, processing phone calls for the entire remainder of the day."

Watson described her personal episode with monitoring and unplugged time on the job. "After four years on the job, I was told I would have to improve or lose my job. I did improve, but it was not enough — I was still three minutes over standards. The job stress became unbearable. One day my supervisor stood over me with a performance report and I knew what was coming. They were again dissatisfied. I tried to work; I felt completely dehumanized. I was mechanically typing and talking but part of me felt deadened. The voices around me were hollow sounds in my head and I could barely function. I looked at my supervisor and said I could not continue to work. She said if I was sick, to go lie down for ten minutes, pull myself together and finish my shift.

"My mind snapped. I said that I did not know what was wrong with me, but I had a feeling that it would take me longer than ten minutes to get over it. I called in sick for the next week and wept every day. I couldn't function and couldn't relate to my family. I finally went to see a counselor through the union employee assistance program who worked

with me for eight months to help me recover from a work-related, job stress nervous breakdown."

Toni Watson's story is only one of many. Monitoring is one of the more insidious VDT-related health hazards and it is being used more and more frequently to track worker performance levels. As Watson advocated in the final moments of her testimony, "The need for legislation to protect all VDT workers is essential. The need for regulation of the automated office industries is great."

At the end of her moving testimony, almost in tears, Watson thanked the audience for listening so attentively to a story that was clearly difficult to tell. But for delivering such an honest and impassioned plea, clearly the thanks go to Toni Watson.

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Labor-Backed VDT Bill Dies in Committee

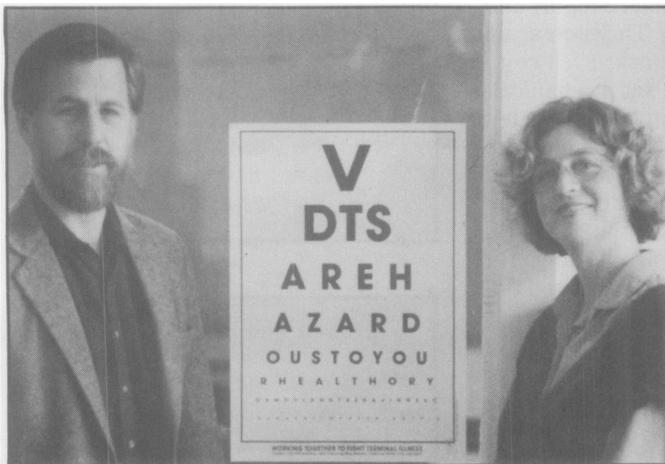
On April 16 Senate Bill 1996, which would have directed CalOSHA to develop VDT health and safety standards, died in the Senate Industrial Relations Committee. Senator Bill Greene, author of the bill and chair of the committee, withdrew the bill after it had been drastically amended by committee members. The amendment, initiated by Senator Ken Maddy, would have directed CalOSHA to study, rather than regulate, the use of VDTs and make recommendations to the legislature at the end of 1987.

The California Labor Federation, the bill's official sponsor, withdrew its support after the Maddy amendment had been accepted. This led to Greene's decision to drop the bill. According to Tom Rankin, Research Director of the Labor Federation, "The amendment made the bill meaningless. We could not support a bill which left open to question whether or not there are health problems associated with VDTs."

The proposed amendment would have made the Greene bill virtually identical to a CalOSHA study bill introduced by Assemblyman Dick Floyd. Unlike every VDT bill in the past, the Floyd bill sailed through the Assembly with very little industry opposition and little active support from labor.

Labor representatives from all over California attended the Greene bill hearing to demonstrate their support for VDT standards. Proponents argued that VDT workers need standards, not further study, as there is already sufficient scientific documentation to support the development of workplace guidelines. John Engwall, of CWA, argued that provisions in the Greene bill requiring CalOSHA to set standards within a one year time period were essential. Without such a legislative mandate, he testified, the standard setting process can take many years. He cited as examples a PCB standard, requested in 1980 which died for lack of follow-up, and an indoor air quality standard which just now is about to be voted on, four years after the initial petition was filed.

In other action, Assemblyman Tom Hayden introduced a bill which would have required state colleges and universities to comply with the state VDT purchasing guidelines adopted in May, 1985. This bill passed out of the Assembly Labor and Employment Committee only after being amended to allow universities and colleges to set their own guidelines.



Pete Rockwell and Lynette Neidhardt, members of Bay Area Typographical Union, Local 21, with VDT Coalition poster. Poster reads: **V DTS ARE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH OR YOU WOULD NOT BE HAVING SUCH A HARD TIME READING THIS. Working Together to Fight Terminal Illness.** Contact: The VDT Coalition, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA. The poster, designed by Neidhardt, is available from the VDT Coalition for \$5.00.

Radiation

(Continued from page 1)

results are a "statistical fluke." They, therefore, have seen no reason to revise their position that there is no link between VDTs and reproductive problems.

When the results of the Swedish study were published, the first reaction of the Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health was to consider changes in their regulations concerning pregnant VDT workers. However, in February, they retracted their position announcing that the results of the study were too preliminary to warrant changing work policy. They did recommend further animal experiments as well as new epidemiological investigations.

In the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency had been planning to attempt to duplicate the 1982 Spanish study linking malformations to magnetic field radiation. However, according to the *VDT News*, the research group assigned to the project has been disbanded due to lack of funds. In addition, a reproductive epidemiological study planned by NIOSH is being held up pending approval of funds from the Federal Office of Management and Budget. However, a long term VDT pregnancy study, co-sponsored by the Service Employees International Union and Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, is underway under the direction of Dr. Irwin Selikoff.

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