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# Labor Occupational Health Program

# MONITOR

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*In This Issue:*

- HOMEWORK
- CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME



# Labor Occupational Health Program MONITOR

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## On the Cover:

This is the second of two special issues of *Monitor* featuring work, technology, and health in the 1980s.

"Homework" is an important new trend—as well as a very old problem. In some ways it has changed little from the 1880s to the 1980s. Thousands of workers in the U.S. still sew or do light assembly work on a piecework basis at home. Violations of the minimum wage, health and safety laws, and other labor standards are the norm. A national debate has been sparked by new U.S. Dept. of Labor proposals to ease legal restrictions on homework. "New technology" has further complicated the question because computers and telecommunications now make it possible for clerical and professional work to be done at home. But are there dangers in such innovations? See page 3.

Also in this issue: Carpal tunnel syndrome (a wrist disorder) and other injuries caused by rapid, repetitive motion can be serious side effects of work on computer keyboards and other "high tech" workplace equipment. Unions are looking for answers; see the story on page 8.

Cover photo: Homework in 1910. Noted documentary photographer Lewis W. Hine found a mother and daughter sewing lace in their New York City apartment.

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## New LOHP Slide/Tape Show

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Construction workers, foremen, and contractors are all potentially exposed to toxic chemicals. In late 1988, the Labor Occupational Health Program released an updated version of its popular slide/tape program **Chemical Hazards in the Building Trades**. The 20-minute show explores in detail specific chemicals found in construction, demolition, and remodeling work, including asbestos, fiberglass, cadmium, solvents, and roofing compounds. Also featured are "right to know" regulations, how hazardous substances may enter and affect the body, and protective measures.

The show consists of 108 slides, a synchronized tape, and a printed script. It is available for \$125. (including postage and



(Photo: California Division of Apprenticeship Standards.)

handling). Orders require prepayment. Please make checks payable to "The Regents of U.C." and allow six weeks for delivery. For more information, call LOHP at (415) 642-5507.

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From Knitting to Telecommuting

## The "New" Homework: Still the Same Old Story?

by Gene Darling

Editor, LOHP Monitor

The U.S. labor movement has been forced to renew an old political battle. Industrial homework, strongly opposed by labor for most of this century, is on the rise again.

The garment industry, which once was notorious for fostering sweatshop conditions in both the factory and the home, is recruiting a new generation of homeworkers. Other blue-collar industries have followed suit. And, because of "new technology" such as computers, modems, and fax machines, the types of work which may feasibly be done at home are greatly expanding. Homeworkers now include secretaries, data entry clerks, librarians, stockbrokers, engineers, and writers.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says that at least eight million Americans now work at home more than eight hours per week, while 1.9 million work exclusively at home. The trend worries labor, worker health and safety advocates, and some public officials.

But the Reagan and Bush administrations have sought to encourage work at home and to eliminate legal restrictions which the U.S. Dept. of Labor adopted over forty years ago.

Is modern homework (of either the blue-collar or white-collar variety) fundamentally different from the system which invited worker abuse and exploitation in earlier decades, or is it still the same old story? Employers point with pride to a few "model" homework programs which they claim offer good wages and conditions, but labor and other critics say that today's homework is little different from yesterday's. Statistics show that the great majority of blue-collar homeworkers today, just as in 1900, are women, minorities, and immigrants who are extremely underpaid and denied basic labor protections. And many argue that even white-collar homework, which may seem far removed from the exploitation and unsafe conditions of the past, can bring sweatshop conditions



In this old magazine woodcut, a family in the East End of London makes boxes at home. (Spare Rib/ LNS.)

into the home: long hours, piecework rates, no fringe benefits, and a work setting that is impossible to monitor for compliance with labor laws.

Questions of worker health and safety have always figured prominently in the case against homework. Since the last century, homeworkers in the jewelry, electrical/electronics, toymaking, textile, and other industries have often been forced to bring toxic chemicals into the home. Some kinds of homework introduce fire, electrical, or sanitation hazards. The long hours, bad lighting, and lack of fresh air in many home workplaces are also traditional problems. Today, one must add to this list of homework hazards all the health concerns related to "new technology"—video display terminal glare and radiation, poorly designed workstation furniture, and many others. All can be as harmful in the "high tech" home workplace as they are in the office.

Critics of homework suggest that management often attempts to relieve itself of responsibility for working conditions by sending work home. How, they ask, can employers comply with the OSHA law's basic requirement that they maintain a safe and healthy workplace if the work-

place is at home, beyond their control?

### EARLY HOMEWORK

Homework flourished and grew in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Employers found that the system offered them many advantages: increased productivity and production flexibility; savings on rent, utilities, and equipment; piecework rates rather than hourly wages; elimination of fringe benefits. There was also an ample supply of labor, concentrated in the big cities, due to immigration. Limited job opportunities in immigrant neighborhoods guaranteed the employer that many people would accept homework despite the poor pay and conditions.

Many companies of that era also saw homework as a way to get around the new labor laws which were then being adopted by cities, states, and the federal government. To avoid new wage, hour, and safety regulations which applied to work in the factory, employers sent work home.

Jay Mazur, president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, recently wrote that "When the state passed

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## HOMework

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a law regulating child labor in factories ... the number of children in homework rose. When a law was passed regulating the hours of work for women in factories, women were given bundles of piece goods to sew at home."

The Depression led to a great increase in homework. By the 1930s, the federal Division of Labor Standards found that 75 or more different manufacturing industries were assigning homework, and that such work was being carried on in virtually every state in the U.S.

The typical homeworker was an immigrant woman who could not find a factory job. Working at home was especially common in the garment industry. Hats, gloves, and dresses were made at home, and often young children in the family were called upon to help. In the jewelry industry, home soldering was common, although it exposed entire families to lead poisoning, cadmium fumes, and dangerous solvents in glues. Many commercial food products were prepared on a piecework basis at home.

Despite attempts at regulation, homework persists in most of these industries in the 1980s—with surprisingly little change.

## THE HOME SWEATSHOP TODAY

Despite the recent growth of computer-based homework, Juana Perez is probably a more typical U.S. homeworker of the 1980s. Testifying under an assumed name, Perez related her experiences at a hearing on homework conducted by the House Subcommittee on Labor Standards in 1986. Although homework in most of the garment industry was banned by federal law in 1942, Perez is a home garment worker in Chicago.

She immigrated from El Salvador in 1983. First, she found a job in an illegal basement factory which paid piecework rates averaging about \$1.60 per hour. Then her employer sold her a sewing machine on the installment plan and she began to work at home. Her daughters, aged 16 and 12, help with the sewing after school and on weekends so she can get the work done. Occasionally she is able to get temporary jobs in regular garment shops. "When I'm laid off, I go back to homework," she said. She wishes child labor were not necessary, "but we need to survive as a family."

In the 1970s and 1980s, both factory

and home sweatshops have reappeared on a major scale in the garment industry. Several factors led to their rise: an influx of immigrants, many of them undocumented; growing competition from imports produced in low-wage countries; and a decline in labor standards enforcement due to government budget-cutting. Some illegal homework operations pay as little as \$1 per hour. Child labor is not uncommon.

"Homeworking is a perfect vehicle for taking advantage of undocumented workers," says one U.S. Dept. of Labor official. Others point out that undocumented immigrant homeworkers are usually paid "under the table" in cash, evading income tax and also cheating the workers out of Social Security and unemployment benefits. They are subject to "job blackmail" if they complain. Since the work they do is illegal, it does not officially exist, so working conditions are not monitored or regulated.

## RURAL HOMEWORK

Not all of today's homework in the garment industry involves immigrants in the ghettos and barrios of large cities. Increasingly, manufacturers are recruiting rural homeworkers as well. Because of the farm depression and rural plant closings, workers far from cities, many of whom once thought of themselves as solidly middle-class, have been forced to take work into their homes.

Employers often suggest that these rural homework arrangements offer evidence that "modern" homework can be fair, clean, and respectable, with good working conditions. Indeed, some rural homeworkers in the garment industry have joined in the fight to legalize homework. A group of Vermont women who knitted ski caps in their homes, for example, gained the national spotlight in the late 1970s when they pressed for an end to the homework ban in the knitted outerwear trade. Their claims that pay and conditions were ideal received considerable media attention.

One firm frequently cited as a "model" homework employer is Bordeaux, Inc., a garment manufacturer in Clarinda, Iowa. But the experience of one of Bordeaux' own homeworkers suggests a very different picture.

In 1986, the House Subcommittee on Labor Standards heard testimony from former Bordeaux seamstress Connie Jorgensen. Jorgensen began doing homework for Bordeaux in 1981, sewing appliques on sweatsuits. Bordeaux had

advertised openly for homeworkers in a local newspaper, despite the fact that the work was illegal.

According to Jorgensen, the job initially seemed to be an ideal way to meet increased family expenses while remaining at home to care for her young daughter. Yet she found she was required to supply all her own equipment—sewing machine, scissors, iron, pens, and tracing material — without reimbursement. Although for several consecutive years she was named one of Bordeaux' "top ten" seamstresses, Jorgensen received a piece rate which did not allow her to earn the minimum wage. She also had to pick up and deliver work in her own car on her own time, and was not paid for time she spent inspecting, ironing, or sewing tags into the sweatsuits.

Jorgensen testified that she sometimes worked up to 18 hours a day, without overtime pay. On occasion, rush work would be delivered to her as late as midnight, to be completed by 6 a.m. Yet she never earned over \$5500 a year. There were no benefits, and she had to pay her own Social Security. When patterns became more complex and took more time to complete, the piece rate remained the same, resulting in a drop in her effective wage to about \$1.85 per hour.



*Peter Green / Guardian / CPF*

Because of the time pressure during peak periods, Jorgensen's husband and young daughter were sometimes enlisted to help her finish an assignment on time—a clear violation of child labor laws. Jorgensen also testified that Bordeaux maintained a system which required some homeworkers to falsify time records.

Another problem for Jorgensen was her health. She developed an ailment called "sewer's neck" and an allergy to fabric dust.

Bordeaux was recently cited on federal charges of denying the minimum wage to 330 current and former homeworkers. The company is also facing a civil suit for \$728,193 in back wages. The U.S. Dept. of Labor has found that Bordeaux' piece rates would have to be nearly doubled to guarantee all experienced seamstresses the minimum wage. The firm is now considering a move to Mexico, where factory wage rates are even lower than its homework labor costs in Iowa.

## TELECOMMUTING

It has been said that we now live in a "global village" where huge amounts of information can be sent throughout the world cheaply and instantaneously. The computer, communications networks, satellites, and fax machines have radically transformed the nature of intellectual work as well as routine paperwork. Many professional and clerical tasks, which once had to be performed in offices close to corporate centers, now can be done anywhere. Stockbrokers can work in cabins near the ski slopes and remain in touch via computer. Architects can create drawings on laptop computers while

flying coast to coast, and later transmit them back to the office via a fax machine at the airport.

These new technologies have led to many important changes in clerical work. For example, they have created a global labor pool. If it is too expensive for a corporation to retain its unionized clericals in New York City or San Francisco, it is now perfectly feasible to have the clerical work sent, by courier or satellite, to the West Indies or Southeast Asia, where wages are much lower and labor standards less strict. Banks, airlines, insurance companies, and others now send clerical work overseas. (*See related story on this page.*)

If professional and clerical work can now easily be sent to the four corners of the earth, it is obvious that it can also be sent into the American home. And, in fact, this new type of homework is gradually growing. Some experts predict that as many as 10 million people may be doing home-based computer work by the 1990s. A new term, *telecommuting*, has been coined to capture the experience of going to work electronically, without ever leaving the house or fighting traffic.

Even some homebuilders have joined the trend; sometimes provisions for home offices, computers, and telecommunications are built into new homes.

Much telecommuting, in both small and large companies, begins as an informal, unpublicized arrangement between management and a few employees. Recently a few employers have begun voluntary, experimental telecommuting programs on a larger scale. Mountain Bell, Control Data Corporation, and the State of California Dept. of General Services have all tried pilot projects. Women on maternity leave and workers who become dis-

abled are often especially attracted to such plans, although many other workers try them as well.

Employers find that sending paperwork home with their employees makes good sense from a management point of view. The advantages are similar to those cited by employers of blue-collar homeworkers—increased productivity; usually piecework rates with no benefits; and savings on office rent, utilities, and sometimes equipment.

Some employers have "sold" their clerical and professional workers on the idea, claiming that the new homework arrangements offer advantages to workers too: reduced commuting time, more flexible work schedules, less need for expensive child care, and other improvements. These employers say the "old" abuses have been eliminated, and that, unlike garment or jewelry industry homework, white-collar homework is perfectly legal.

Some workers agree that there is no exploitation. Indeed, sometimes the initial suggestion that an employer institute a telecommuting homework program has come from workers themselves. Some telecommuters are so enthusiastic that they have formed national organizations to encourage the practice. Many of these groups, like the Association of Electronic Cottagers, are especially concerned with fighting city zoning ordinances which restrict work in homes.

Labor, other critics, and many white-collar homeworkers themselves remain skeptical about telecommuting. One type of criticism emphasizes the broad social problems telecommuting can potentially create, such as dispersing sensitive or personal information contained in govern-

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## U.S. Clerical Work Sent Overseas

Working at home is not the only innovation which modern technology has made possible in the world of clerical work. Because of computers and satellites, clerical jobs now can be transferred overseas, just like factory jobs have been for years.

Dozens of U.S. companies are now sending their labor-intensive paperwork to "offshore offices" in the West Indies, Southeast Asia, Ireland, India, and China. There, the data is keyed into computers by operators paid a fraction of U.S. wages. Then it may be shipped back in the form of magnetic tapes or disks, or beamed back by satellites.

One Southern California subcontractor, Saztec Corporation, sends other companies' clerical work to its facilities in the Philippines and Singapore. It pays \$2 to \$3 an hour in those countries, but says that some other firms pay less. Saztec says that overseas productivity is high and that "turnover is

less than one percent a year compared to 20 to 50 percent in the States." One Saztec manager says that overseas clerical workers are usually faster and more accurate than Americans.

An estimated 40 companies in the U.S., Japan, and England now send their office work overseas. Banking, insurance, legal, and publishing firms, which produce massive amounts of paperwork, profit the most from the practice. Some now use satellite telecommunications to speed up the process of sending information back and forth.

Several years ago, American Airlines phased out 200 keypunching jobs at its accounting center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and created a subsidiary, Caribbean Data Services, in Barbados. Now the airline sends a million used passenger tickets per week to Barbados, and workers there sort them and enter relevant information on video display terminals.

The final data is sent by satellite back to Tulsa. The workers in Barbados are paid a third of their U.S. counterparts' wages.

American saves about \$4 million a year with the new arrangement. Now Caribbean Data Services is also accepting work on contract from other U.S. companies.

"With technology where it is now," said one official of the airline, "we had no reason to keep this operation in America."

The Barbados government offered tax and other incentives in exchange for the decision to locate the facility there, believing it would create jobs and increase the population's familiarity with computers.

*Excerpted from Pacific News Service*

## HOMEWORK

*continued from page 5*

ment, bank, or insurance records into thousands of private homes.

Yet the most serious issues which arise involve workers, their economic status, and their health. Professional homeworkers report fewer problems than clericals, in part because they usually continue to be paid a salary rather than a piece rate. Still, both professionals and clericals say there are unexpected difficulties. There can be a feeling of isolation from workplace interaction with other people. Sometimes there are interruptions, sometimes conflict with spouses. There may be a lack of motivation; it's difficult to "get started." Some workers say they need an office atmosphere in order to work; in fact, one company now sells a tape recording of office sounds to make the home workplace seem more realistic.

Conversely, there can be too much motivation; sometimes it's difficult to stop working and workaholic tendencies are encouraged.

Overshadowing these psychological issues, the most basic problems of home office work seem to be the same ones that have plagued home factory work for generations. According to Kathleen Christensen, director of a homework study project at the City University of New York, employers "save from 30 to 50 percent on each home-based contractor ... by not having to pay a salary [or] benefits." Christensen said that one insurance company programmer, who had earned \$25,000 a year with benefits as an office employee, dropped to \$7,000 a year without benefits after switching to homework.

"Often homework is a cruel hoax," Christensen says. Companies typically change an employee's status to "independent contractor," a title which sounds impressive and brings to mind 1980s America's glorification of entrepreneurship. Christensen terms this a fraudulent practice. The workers retain all the duties and responsibilities of employees, while the companies give them no benefits and take no responsibility for them. As contractors, the workers must also pay a higher Social Security tax since they receive no employer contribution.

The experience of Beverly Voss is a good illustration of the surprises that may await white-collar homeworkers. A former claims processor for California-Western States Life Insurance in Sacramento, California, Voss was one of eight employees who accepted a 1984 company offer to do VDT work at home. Sub-

sequently the eight sued their employer for over \$200,000 in lost benefits and \$1 million in punitive damages.

In 1986, Voss testified about what happened. She had worked in the company's office for eight years, but accepted the homework offer because she had just had a baby and it was difficult to find child care. The company classified her as an "independent contractor." Claims were to be sent to her at home via a telephone link with the company's computer, and she would turn in her completed work the same way. The pay initially offered was comparable to her office pay, although it was piecework and she would be required to process considerably more claims per week than she had in the office to earn the same money. She also would have to buy her own desk and office supplies.

Soon Voss found that the company expected her to learn, on her own time, extensive changes it had made in the claims processing system. And although real independent contractors are usually not subject to intensive supervision (only the end product of their work is evaluated), Voss found herself spending considerable time at home submitting to company audits and digesting new operational directives. She wasn't left alone. These intrusions slowed her work, and she had to work longer and longer hours to maintain her income.

Voss' attorney argues that, under state law, she and the other women never stopped being employees and are thus entitled to benefits. The company's attorney disagrees, saying that the women "made an informed decision" to "trade the benefits of employment for the benefits of independence."

But according to another of the women in the group, "All of us had been with the company so many years, we trusted that they weren't going to hurt us."

## CHILD CARE DILEMMAS

Social changes in the U.S. during the last decade have resulted in more and more women joining the workforce. The shortage and high cost of child care for U.S. working mothers has led many women to see homework as an appealing option. Both blue-collar workers (like Perez and Jorgensen) and white-collar workers (like Voss) say that child care problems were originally a factor in their decision to begin working at home.

Cases of child labor, of course, are the most vivid illustrations that this solution to the child care dilemma doesn't work. Both Perez and Jorgensen were forced to

enlist the help of their young children just to get their work done. The history of homework has thousands of similar stories.

There are many other difficulties. Christensen, the City University of New York researcher, surveyed 14,000 homeworkers and found that half of the clerical and professional women with preschool children had to use supplementary child care in order to work at home. Those who did not use other child care often found that it was impossible to work while the child was awake and active, so that they were forced to extend their work day into early mornings or late nights.

"The notion that a woman can hold a baby in one hand and handle a computer terminal with the other is a fallacy. It is also an insult to the seriousness with which women approach both their child care and their work," Christensen wrote.

A recent report by the U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment recommended that "Child care services must be greatly expanded so that women may make free and unforced choices as to whether, when, and under what terms they will work at home. Women should not continue to be compelled to struggle with individual solutions to the major societal problem of child care."

## THE CASE AGAINST HOMEWORK

Many U.S. unions have taken a position against all forms of homework. At recent Congressional hearings, vigorous opposition to homework was expressed by the International Ladies' Garment Workers (ILGWU), the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU), the Service Employees (SEIU), and other unions. This opposition is not limited to blue-collar home sweatshops. At its 1983 convention, the AFL-CIO called for a ban on telecommuting, and the office workers' organization "Nine to Five" (an SEIU affiliate) is a prominent opponent of home clerical work.

Conservatives and "right to work" advocates of the present day often seek to portray labor's opposition to homework as the self-serving reaction of a declining social force. They charge that labor is simply out of step with the times, frustrated at the erosion of its former power, and jealous of homework's success. Many suggest that unions fight homework because they know they can't organize homeworkers.

"It's very hard to organize people in their homes, and it's even harder to collect

dues from them," says Lee Bellinger, public affairs director of the Center on National Labor Policy, a conservative group. "The unions need new members to continue to exist, and they are afraid that telecommuters will be less likely to become union members."

Dennis Chamot, Ph.D., associate director of the Professional Employees Dept. of the AFL-CIO, replies: "There are more than enough unorganized workers in traditional workplaces to keep interested unions busy for a long time. The largest opposition [to homework] comes from precisely those unions which have the most vivid memories of past abuses of homeworkers. Many of the factors which characterized the earlier abusive experiences are present, or potentially present—a large available workforce, strong competitive pressures on employers, lack of bargaining power by the highly dispersed workforce, [and] inability to adequately enforce regulations. We will work to see that history does not repeat itself."

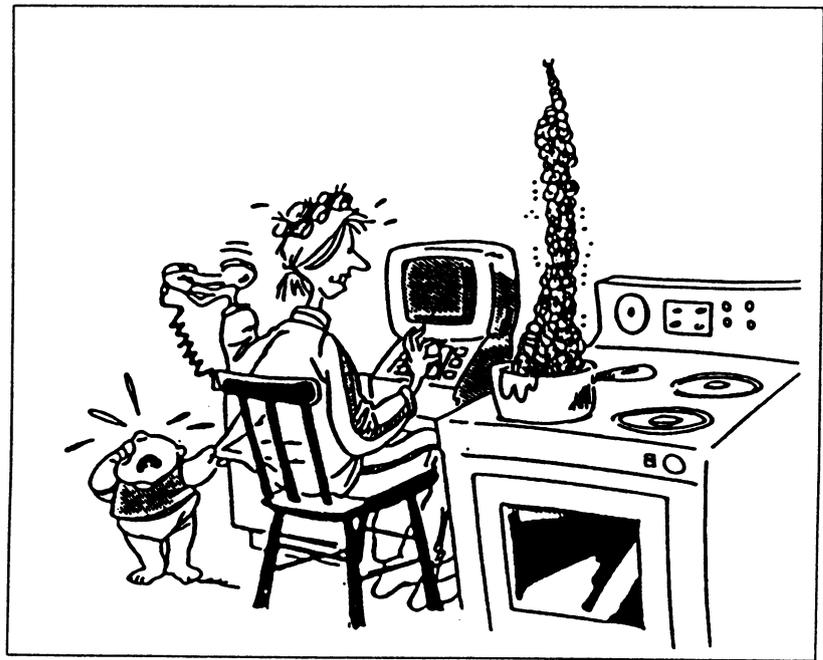
The arguments of the "right to work" groups ignore the fact that informed U.S. opinion from the nineteenth century to the New Deal era overwhelmingly viewed homework as a social evil. From a historical standpoint, it is today's homework supporters, not unions, who are out of step.

A comprehensive 1939 report by the staff of the U.S. Dept. of Labor's Division of Labor Standards ably summarized the case against homework:

The inherent abuses of the practice are many. The employer is able to expand or contract his working force at short notice without the responsibility, or the expense, of maintaining throughout the entire year factory space and equipment to meet a peak load. Thus he avoids the responsibility for overhead costs ... rent, lighting, heat, and, in some industries, even for machinery.

The industrial home worker, on the other hand, must provide work space in his or her own home. If the process requires it, she must furnish her own sewing machine and pay for repairs. She must buy needles with which to sew, oil for greasing the machine, thread, and other incidentals, which the employer provides without question when the work is performed in a factory. Frequently she is required to call for the work and return it to her employer, thus adding the cost of transportation.

There are times during dull periods when home workers have no work whatsoever ... [but] when the busy season comes it is only by working long, tedious hours and sometimes far into the night that the home worker is able to comply with the demands of the employer. Women constitute a large proportion... but frequently the comple-



Many clerical and professional workers have been attracted to "telecommuting" via computers at home. But what are the costs? (Cartoon: Women's Skill Development Society.)

tion of the allotment becomes a family affair, and all available hands, including those of young children, are put to the task of performing the work.

Rates are practically always less than those paid the factory worker. ... Many families whose members are employed by industry to work in their homes have been carried on the public relief rolls.

The savings accruing to the homework employer make it difficult, and in some instances impossible, for his competitor who produces in a factory to maintain fair standards of hours, wages, and working conditions.

For more than a century industrial homework has been recognized in this country as a social and economic evil. No industrial practice has called more clearly for legal regulation.

## HOMEWORK REGULATION

By the mid-1930s nearly half the states had passed laws which attempted to regulate homework. These laws were typically promoted by labor, by public health advocates primarily concerned with ensuring sanitary finished products, and by some manufacturers who sought to eliminate the unfair competition with which the homework industries confronted them. Most of the laws were weak measures. Few involved outright bans on homework. Most, instead, set up certification systems which required homework employers (and sometimes the workers as well) to register

with the state and keep records of wages and hours.

Some states also set minimum wages and maximum hours for work at home. Some banned home child labor. A number of states also applied their workers' compensation and unemployment insurance laws to homeworkers. The theory behind many of these state laws was that equalizing conditions between work in the factory and work at home would eliminate some of the economic advantages of homework to employers, leading to the eventual abolition of the homework system.

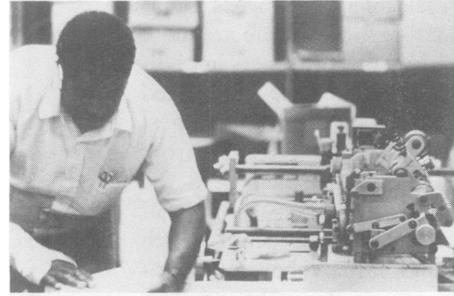
Most of the early state laws failed, partly because homework was often interstate in nature and partly because no state had sufficient enforcement apparatus.

In 1938, the U.S. Congress passed the landmark Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which sought to make laws governing wages, hours, and child labor uniform throughout the U.S. and to provide vigorous enforcement. The FLSA applied to all industries engaged in interstate commerce or in the production of goods for interstate commerce. While the FLSA contained no specific reference to industrial homework, it was interpreted by the U.S. Dept. of Labor as applying to all employees in the affected industries, "whether they perform their work at home, in the factory, or elsewhere." Thus the homework manufacturer was obligated to meet FLSA standards on wages,

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# VIDEO VIEWS

*Monitor* now features this regular section devoted to news and information about automation on the job. It replaces the formerly separate newsletter *Video Views*, which was published until 1987 by LOHP and the VDT Coalition. The new section, to appear in each issue, will report on the health and safety implications of video display terminals and other new technology, union responses, regulatory issues, and legislation. Former *Video Views* subscribers are invited to subscribe to *Monitor* for our future ongoing coverage of the "high tech" workplace.



*Carpal tunnel syndrome can result from rapid, repetitive movements of the hand or wrist. (Photo copyright (c) Ken Light.)*

## Repetitive Strain Injury On the Job— Three Workplace Stories

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) is a growing occupational health problem. One of the most common kinds of RSI is carpal tunnel syndrome, an injury which can cause weakness, numbness, pain, and swelling in the wrist or hand. Carpal tunnel syndrome, which sometimes develops into an extremely disabling condition, can be a hazard of both "high tech" and "low tech" jobs. It has been found among assembly line work-

ers, mail sorters, meatcutters, computer operators, and many others. But the fast pace and automated equipment on today's jobs have made the disorder much more prevalent; it has been called the "occupational health problem of the 1980s." Following are stories about carpal tunnel syndrome in three very different workplaces.

### *Over 50 Cases Found in California County*

## Courtroom Clerks' Union Tackles Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

by **Matt Nathanson**

*Field Representative  
SEIU Local 715  
San Jose, California*

When courtroom clerks in the Santa Clara County (California) Municipal Court started complaining of health problems with their hands and arms, they had no idea that they were helping to begin a county-wide campaign to address a previously obscure workplace injury known as carpal tunnel syndrome. They approached their union, Local 715 of the Service Employees International Union. Now, almost a year later, workers in many kinds of jobs all over Santa Clara County are becoming aware of, and getting treatment for, this potentially crippling condition.

Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), named after a sheath of tissue that surrounds nerves in the wrist, is an injury to the

median nerve. This nerve runs down the arm, through the wrist, and into the hand. Repeated use of the wrist and hand in a bent or awkward position, grasping, twisting, or other forceful wrist/hand actions can cause the tendons in the wrist to swell up and press down on the median nerve, resulting in damage.

The symptoms of CTS include numbness and tingling in the hands, pain and swelling in the wrist, difficulty grasping objects, and loss of hand strength. Surgery may sometimes be required to relieve the problem. Ultimately CTS can cause a person to lose the use of his/her hand.

### **THE PROBLEM**

To keep track of cases, the Santa Clara County courtroom clerks must press down hard with their pens on thick forms designed to make six copies. After work-

ing with hundreds of forms every day, clerk Ann Jovet began to have difficulty pressing down. Her wrist ached, and she even had trouble opening the child-proof caps on medicine bottles. Jovet, who is also a Local 715 steward, says she didn't want to believe she had a problem, but finally saw a doctor. Soon she was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome. She is now recovering from the ailment through medication and rest.

The clerks also reported shoulder and back pain from stretching to lift files off the judges' raised desks. A clerk may have to repeat this simple action more than 100 times a day.

Responding to these problems, Local 715 worked jointly with Municipal Court management to conduct a survey of the clerks. Of 48 courtroom clerks, 23 reported having at least some symptoms of CTS and related injuries. One had already undergone surgery. Jovet took the

survey results to the County Board of Supervisors to help justify hiring an additional clerk in the department.

Further, in the summer of 1988 the union and management organized an in-depth study of the clerks' working conditions by occupational health experts from nearby Valley Medical Center. The study is examining the way each job is performed, and will make specific recommendations on what changes can be made to prevent future injuries. Results of the study are expected soon.

Dr. Linda Morse, an occupational medicine specialist who is in charge of the study, recently told a local newspaper that solutions to be recommended may include rearranging furniture and providing special pens that are easier to grip. It is also possible that the six-part forms could be eliminated by using photocopies instead.

## VDT WORKERS AFFECTED TOO

Broadening the survey conducted at the Municipal Court, Local 715 also surveyed workers in many jobs throughout the county to determine where else carpal tunnel syndrome might be a problem. The union learned that those vulnerable to this injury included janitors, food service workers, bus drivers, communications dispatchers, stenographers, and many others who do repetitive work with their hands and wrists. Those who do keyboard work, such as typists and VDT operators, seemed to be at particular risk. The survey uncovered over 50 cases of CTS among union members employed by Santa Clara County.

According to the county's workers' compensation manager, at least 35 com-

pensation claims involving CTS were filed by county employees last year.

## ORGANIZING TO FIGHT

Union members decided to form a committee to learn more about this injury, and to organize the workforce to seek solutions. The committee met with health experts and workers' compensation officials. As a result we found that:

- **Carpal tunnel syndrome is preventable;**
- **Workers must be educated about the causes and symptoms of CTS, so they can get immediate treatment;**
- **Early treatment of CTS saves the worker from pain and permanent**

*continued on page 10*

## Carpal Tunnel Syndrome: A Fact Sheet

*(Adapted from a pamphlet prepared by SEIU Local 715, San Jose, California.)*

### WHAT IS CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME?

The carpal tunnel is a narrow, enclosed tunnel of bone and ligament in the wrist. Through it pass the tendons, which enable the hands and fingers to move, and the median nerve. This nerve provides feeling to the palm, thumb, and first three fingers, and gives motor signals which tell thumb and finger muscles to move.

Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) can result from compression of the median nerve as it passes through the tunnel. Repeated bending of the wrist forwards or backwards, and some other wrist motions, are one possible source of this compression. Such movements may also inflame the tendons, causing them to swell and increase pressure on the nerve further. Permanent nerve and muscular damage can follow. Once the nerve is damaged, the hand can lose its ability to grip objects, leading to partial crippling.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Usually an initial numbness and tingling in the hand, thumb, and fingers.
- Occasional pain at the wrist, worsening to more severe constant pain.
- Swelling in the hand and wrist.
- Tingling and discomfort in the hand at night, perhaps interrupting sleep.
- Loss of strength in the hand; difficulty grasping objects.

### WHO IS AFFECTED?

Carpal tunnel syndrome has many possible causes; some are not related to the job. Pregnant and post-menopausal women, and others with hormone imbalances, can develop the condition because retained fluids compress the median nerve. Illnesses such as diabetes, thyroid disease, and rheumatoid arthritis may also lead to CTS.

On the job, exposure to some chemicals (like certain solvents) can cause nerve damage, including damage to the median nerve.

But fast, repetitive hand and wrist motions required by the job are a primary cause of carpal tunnel syndrome today. The disorder is becoming more widespread partly because new technology has increased the pace at which we work.

Workers at risk include typists and computer operators; stenographers; bus drivers; communications dispatchers; janitors; cashiers; food service workers; meatcutters; others who handle knives; plumbers; electricians; assembly line workers; and those in any job involving repetitive movement of the hands.

### WHAT ACTIVITIES AT WORK CAN CAUSE IT?

- Using hands in awkward positions.
- Working with the wrists always bent, or subject to repetitive up-and-down bending.
- Circular twisting of the wrists.
- Forceful grasping or pinching motions.
- Vibration.
- Any highly repetitive and forceful action.

### HOW CAN IT BE PREVENTED?

- Better and more ergonomic design of tools, equipment, and work areas, including the use of arm/hand supports, elimination of hard or sharp edges on work surfaces, and positioning of work to avoid bent hand positions.
- Varying tasks to provide rest breaks or relief activities.
- Education of workers and management on causes and prevention.

### IF YOU HAVE SYMPTOMS

Workers with symptoms should see a physician, preferably an occupational health specialist. If necessary, get a second opinion. Be sure to tell the doctor about your job, and that you think your symptoms may be work-related. There are tests available with which physicians can diagnose carpal tunnel syndrome, like nerve conduction studies.

Contact the union. File a report of workplace injury at your job site. If you plan a workers' compensation claim, file it as soon as possible after the onset of the symptoms.

The physician may recommend rotation to a low-risk job; resting the wrist by wearing lightweight wrist splints; or undergoing physical therapy. Medications may also be prescribed, such as aspirin, small amounts of steroids injected into the wrist, or other anti-inflammatories taken as pills. In severe cases, surgery may be recommended to relieve pressure on the median nerve.

## CARPAL TUNNEL

*continued from page 9*

**injury, and saves the employer money in sick leave time and workers' compensation.**

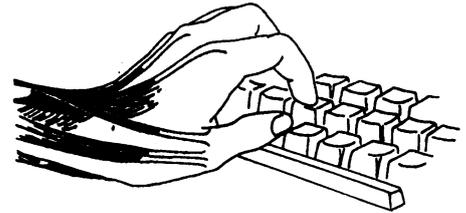
- **Adjustable work stations, variations in work routines, rest breaks, and other changes in job equipment or working conditions can help prevent CTS.**

The committee has taken on a number of projects to teach county workers more about CTS. With the help of our International Union, we produced a pamphlet explaining the disorder, which is now available to union members. (*See excerpts*

*on page 9.*) The committee also developed a workshop on CTS, given to stewards during union leadership training under the direction of stewards Ann Jovet, Susan Lillie, Rachel Subega and the union's field representative, Matt Nathanson.

All the activity around carpal tunnel syndrome is starting to pay off. In September, 1988, the *San Jose Mercury News* interviewed Jovet and Lillie for an article on CTS. Hardly a week goes by without a union member calling the office to find out how to get diagnosed or treated for CTS. Union member Joann Phillips, a communications dispatcher, is an example of a success story. As a result of union education on CTS, she received early treatment for her injury. After six weeks the condition had subsided. She never had to miss a day of work or have surgery.

Organizing around a health and safety issue like CTS has also helped to build the union. Many workers who were not active in the union before have become involved in work on this issue. Many fights are still ahead of us, but Local 715 members in Santa Clara County are off to a great start.



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### *Newspaper Guild Fights Carpal Tunnel Syndrome*

## **Fresno Bee Copy Editors Seek Redesigned Workstations**

A cluster of repetitive strain injuries (RSI) has been found among copy editors at the *Fresno Bee* newspaper in California. According to The Newspaper Guild, many of the editors have complained of problems with their hands, wrists, fingers, and arms. The first reported case was that of Deborah McKown, a copy editor who had surgery on both wrists for carpal tunnel syndrome, one form of RSI. Since her experience came to the attention of the Guild, 24 additional complaints of carpal tunnel syndrome symptoms have surfaced at the *Bee*.

These developments are of particular concern to the Guild since carpal tunnel syndrome can be permanently disabling. In response, the Guild is demanding that immediate steps be taken by management to protect already-injured workers and to prevent further injuries.

In the summer of 1988, the *Bee's* insurance carrier conducted an investigation of the worksite conditions of the copy editors, who work primarily on video display terminals. According to Larkie Gildersleeve of the Guild, the company study was "inadequate and evasive." The Guild thus commissioned its own study by Laura Stock, associate director of the Labor Occupational Health Program at the University of California at Berkeley.

Stock's study revealed a number of problems in workstation design that could be contributing to the high number of RSI complaints, such as lack of adjustable tables and chairs, lack of sufficient work-

space, and improperly designed or non-existent wrist rests. She recommended that the newspaper provide flexible and easily adjustable workstations; establish clear criteria for furniture and equipment purchasing; involve end users and the union in workstation and job design decisions; provide an employee training program; and develop a system for early identification and treatment of repetitive strain injuries and other work-related disorders.

### **SOME PROGRESS**

The company has made some progress in addressing the problem of RSI. The *Bee* has formed a committee of management and employees which has studied Stock's recommendations. The committee also visited the *Los Angeles Times* to review its RSI prevention program, developed in response to a high number of RSI complaints there.

In addition, an ergonomist has been hired as a consultant to the *Bee*. The Guild has been told that the ergonomist has studied working conditions, made recommendations, and will be back at the newspaper offices on a regular basis to consult with employees and management about individual needs and overall remedies.

The Guild is demanding that the newspaper replace all pre-VDT furniture in the editorial department. The company has already notified the union that all existing chairs that do not meet standards for comfort and adjustability will be replaced.

The *Bee* has also agreed to develop an

employee training program. Training plans include a video that each employee will view, and individual follow-up at each employee's workstation.

Responding to Guild members' complaints that they are being sent to medical practitioners who are ill-equipped to handle wrist, elbow, and hand disorders, the company has now arranged that these patients will be referred to a specialist in hand injuries. Early reports from McKown and others are that the new therapist is having some success in treating them.

Although it appears that the company has come a long way, Gildersleeve says that the union still has some real concerns. "Though they have made a commitment to replace some chairs," she says, "they have yet to commit to undertake the major redesign of chairs, tables, and lighting that is desperately needed. We have also not yet received a timeline as to when the new purchases will be made or the training implemented." Most important, she says, is what the company will do about those employees who are already injured or disabled.

The RSI problems highlight the dangers involved in improper VDT work environments, says Gildersleeve. "While people tend to think of VDT problems as minor or temporary, it is clear that unless these repetitive strain injuries are prevented more and more workers will suffer permanent disability which, in the worst cases, could end otherwise productive careers."

# Grocery Clerks and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome: A Letter from a Reader

## To Video Views:

I began working for Safeway Stores in 1979; I was a Courtesy Clerk for six months and was then promoted to Grocery Clerk. I had no health problems and I liked my job.

In May, 1985, scanner checkstands were installed at the store where I worked. Within a few months my hands began getting numb. The pain and numbness increased, and by December I would wake up at night in terrible pain, my hands and arms numb.

In January, 1986, I was diagnosed at Kaiser Hospital as having bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome (i.e. in both hands). I had surgery on both hands in March, 1986, and was released to return to work in May, even though I was still experiencing pain. The pain increased. By June I was unable to work and again on disability.

Safeway's workers' compensation office referred me to another doctor, who also diagnosed bilateral carpal tunnel syn-

drome. I had surgery on both hands again in July and August, 1986, followed by physical therapy.

When I returned to work in late October, 1986, my hands seemed OK. Pain began again in January, 1987, and continued to increase even though I was only working 17 hours per week. (My doctor had not released me to return full-time.) On March 5, 1987, the pain was simply unbearable and I had to leave work. My doctor said I would have to change occupations since my hands could not tolerate my job at Safeway. I was put back on workers' comp, and now, over a year later, I am still on disability.

The prospects for my rehabilitation do not look good. Most jobs available would require using my hands.

Carpal tunnel syndrome has had a terrible effect on me. My entire life, both work and personal, has drastically changed. My hands hurt *all* of the time. I never fully realized just how important my hands are to nearly every facet of life until I lost so

much of their function.

I believe that had I been aware and knowledgeable about carpal tunnel syndrome *before* I became a victim, I could have avoided surgery and permanent disability, and be working today.

Carpal tunnel syndrome can become a permanent and crippling disability, especially if not treated early by a specialist. It is preventable through such means as better workstation design, training of workers, elimination of productivity requirements, and other relatively simple changes in the workplace. I am convinced that the short-term costs of prevention are far less than the long-term costs of disability. The pain, suffering, and aggravation I have endured for the past three years are something no human being should have to go through. What can be done to prevent what's happened to me from happening to other workers?

—Stephanie L. Gaffney  
Redwood City, California

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## Repetitive Strain Injury in the News

### 180 RSI Cases at Telephone Company

## Denver Phone Operators Win Improvements Through OSHA Complaint

A union complaint to federal OSHA, filed as a result of a high number of repetitive strain injuries among directory assistance operators in Denver, Colorado, has produced an important victory. In late 1988, a settlement was reached between OSHA and the local telephone operating company, U.S. West Communications (formerly Mountain Bell), requiring ergonomics training, worksite evaluations, and workstation redesign.

At U.S. West's Denver directory assistance office, more than 180 operators have filed claims asking workers' compensation for repetitive strain injuries (RSI). Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7777 says that approxi-

mately 500 operators there spend their entire shifts typing names into computers. According to the Union, the RSI problem was caused by poor workstation design, poor lighting, and use of a new keyboard called the "Version 2." The Version 2 uses an unusual keyboard configuration (known as DVORAK) which supposedly enables faster typing.

In response to the RSI problem, U.S. West employees filed a product liability suit against Computer Consoles, Inc., the manufacturer of the keyboards. (The keyboards have since been replaced, but the suit continues.) In addition, the union called in OSHA, which eventually settled with U.S. West.

The settlement requires that the company hire an "ergonomics coordinator" to conduct walkaround inspections at all directory assistance locations within U.S. West, which covers 14 states. The company must complete all the evaluations and provide the union with copies of the written reports by May 1, 1989. The company must also conduct ergonomics training for all Denver employees and provide ergonomically designed workstations, including adjustable tables, chairs, and footrests. Finally, management must work directly with the union to identify and resolve ergonomic problems throughout the company.

—Laura Stock, LOHP

## **“Nine to Five” Announces Computer Monitoring Hotline**

The National Association of Working Women (“Nine to Five”) has launched a new toll-free telephone hotline to give advice to workers subjected to electronic monitoring on the job. Workers’ stories about their experiences with monitoring will also be collected through the hotline for a future “Nine to Five” report on monitoring abuses.

Over six million U.S. workers now have their work monitored by computer-based systems. Such systems can count key-

strokes per minute, seconds between phone calls, or even seconds on break. This information is often used to evaluate job performance and discipline workers. (*For more on electronic monitoring, see Monitor, Summer 1988, page 8.*)

“A host of computer accessories ... are now being used by managers to watch over and control office workers to an extent that was never possible before. The result is not control of the quality of work so much as control of the worker,” says

Karen Nussbaum, executive director of “Nine to Five.”

Both employees who experience the abuse of computer monitoring and employers who have reformed their monitoring practices are encouraged to call the hotline. From anywhere in the U.S., call, toll-free: (800) 245-9to5. Hours (Eastern time) are Monday through Thursday from 11 am to 2 pm, plus Wednesday evening from 6 to 9 pm.

### **SAN JOSE MOVES FORWARD ON VDT SAFETY**

Responding to a growing number of employee disability retirements stemming from VDT-related health problems, the City of San Jose, California has instituted new purchasing guidelines for VDT equipment and a new employee training program.

In the future, the City will require suppliers of VDTs and related equipment to conform to the new “American National Standard for Human Factors Engineering of Visual Display Terminal Workstations,” which sets minimum ergonomic requirements for displays, keyboards, furniture, lighting, and noise in VDT workplaces. (*For more information on the standard, see Monitor, Summer 1988, page 13.*)

In addition, older terminals and PCs have been fitted with glare filters; the City Safety Officer has compiled a set of guidelines for VDT work; and departments are being encouraged to purchase new tables of the correct height for existing terminals.

Some City management staff recently attended a VDT workshop sponsored by local labor groups and the VDT Coalition. The City plans to follow up with a workshop for operators and supervisors early in 1989.

*Excerpted from Silicon Valley Toxics News*

## **California City, SEIU Agree to VDT Improvements**

The Fremont Association of City Employees (FACE) and the City of Fremont, California will work to improve conditions for video display terminal operators as a result of a 1988 management agreement to several FACE proposals. FACE is a chapter of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 790.

In preparation for negotiations, FACE invited the VDT Coalition and the Labor Occupational Health Program to present a workshop on VDT safety. The union also conducted a survey of VDT operators working in the Fremont Police Department and presented the results to management. After meeting with the union, the City of Fremont agreed to the following:

- The City will abide by guidelines, issued by the State of California for its own offices, which set standards for new purchases of terminals and related support equipment. The guidelines require that new equipment conform to minimum health and safety specifications.

- The City will purchase auxiliary VDT

equipment, to be ordered by each City department as needed. These items include adjustable swivel arms for VDT monitors, adjustable copy holders, foot-rests, wrist rests, and anti-glare screens.

- The City will replace several chairs which do not meet health and safety needs.

—Laura Stock, LOHP

*Monitor’s report on the work of Cal/OSHA’s Advisory Committee on Video Display Terminals, originally scheduled for this issue, will instead appear in the Winter 1989 issue.*

In addition to publishing *Monitor*, the Labor Occupational Health Program produces many other publications and audiovisual materials. We also offer training sessions and conferences on numerous job health and safety topics for workers, unions, health professionals, and the general

public. Other LOHP services include technical assistance, primarily to labor, and various special educational projects. This section of *Monitor* reports on recent LOHP activities and announces upcoming events.

### *Hair Care and Beauty Salon Workers*

## **LOHP "Beauty and the Beast" Conference in April**

In cooperation with United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 428, the Labor Occupational Health Program will present a one-day conference on the health hazards of the hair care and beauty professions on Monday, April 24, 1989, at the San Jose Hyatt in San Jose, California.

The conference, **Beauty and the Beast**, will examine what is known about these hazards and will evaluate strategies workers and consumers can use to reduce them. The program should be of interest to barbers, cosmetologists, manicurists, hair stylists, cosmeticians, and salon owners as well as to hair care and beauty instructors, union representatives, health and safety professionals, health care practitioners, and students.

Every day some 750,000 hair and beauty salon employees in the U.S. are exposed to workplace chemicals which

are suspected of causing neurological damage, respiratory problems, reproductive disorders, and cancer. The federal Food and Drug Administration regulates cosmetics and hair care products but does not require manufacturers to research product health risks or to list chemical ingredients on the labels. Consequently, barbers and beauticians may be unaware of the potential chemical hazards they face on the job. They may also suffer from musculoskeletal disorders, including back pain and varicose veins.

The conference will feature major presentations by LOHP staff and others on chemical hazards, musculoskeletal problems, and infectious diseases such as AIDS. There will also be a "speakout" with workers' own stories, a series of workshops, and a concluding session on strategies for legislative and union action.

Space is limited, and advance registration by April 1 is recommended. The advance registration fee, which includes materials and lunch, is \$30.00. Three or more registrants from the same organization pay \$25.00 each. A special rate of \$15.00 is also available for union members and students. All rates increase after April 1 (if space is available); contact LOHP for details.

Continuing Education credit will be offered for nurses, and is expected to be available for cosmetology and barber instructors as well. For those from out of town, room reservations may be made directly with the San Jose Hyatt at (408) 993-1234.

For more information on the conference, or to register, please call Lucy Martinez at LOHP, (415) 642-5507.

### *Continuing Education Program*

## **"Fundamentals of Industrial Hygiene" Course in June**

LOHP's Continuing Education program will repeat its popular week-long course, **Fundamentals of Industrial Hygiene**, from June 25-29, 1989 at the Westin Hotel, San Francisco International Airport.

The course is co-sponsored by the Northern California Occupational Health Center (with which LOHP is affiliated) and the National Safety Council's Safety Training Institute, Western Region Office. Course director is LOHP industrial hygienist Barbara A. Plog, M.P.H., C.I.H., C.S.P. Other instructors include Cynthia Hines, M.S., C.I.H.; Jeffrey Jones, M.P.H., C.I.H.; Patricia Quinlan, M.P.H., C.I.H.; and specialists from industry, academia, government, and occupational medicine.

This basic introduction to industrial hygiene should be of interest to plant and personnel managers, supervisors, union

representatives, nurses, safety engineers, new industrial hygienists, and those in the fields of risk management and loss control.

Among the topics covered will be: overview of industrial hygiene; the many disciplines that interact with industrial hygiene; fundamental terms and concepts; hazard evaluation and control; toxicology; routes of entry; chemical, physical, and biological hazards; ergonomics; occupational epidemiology; respiratory protection; ventilation; confined spaces; occupational dermatitis; heat stress; noise; radiation; medical monitoring; standards; industrial hygiene instrumentation; and sampling. This is not a study course for the Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH) exam, but rather an introduction to the field.

Course fee is \$750., including materials and refreshments. Early registration (before June 1) is \$715. Discount rates are

available for National Safety Council members. Each participant will receive a copy of the textbook *Fundamentals of Industrial Hygiene*, 3rd edition, edited by Barbara A. Plog and published by the National Safety Council in 1988.

The course has been approved for 32 hours of Continuing Education credit for registered nurses. Discount hotel accommodations are available at the Westin Hotel; call the hotel at (415) 692-3500 and mention the National Safety Council conference to obtain the discount.

For more information on course content, please call Barbara Plog at LOHP, (415) 642-5507. For registration information, please call the National Safety Council at (415) 341-5649. Registrations should be mailed to: Safety Training Institute, National Safety Council, Western Region Office, 1111 Triton Drive, Suite 201, Foster City, CA 94404.

*Treatment, Storage, and Disposal Courses***LOHP Will Present Hazardous Waste Worker Training**

LOHP's new Hazardous Waste Worker Training Project will begin offering courses in the spring of 1989 for California workers who treat, store, or dispose of hazardous waste.

Funded by a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), LOHP's project is a component of a California Consortium which includes several University programs and other groups throughout the state. The Consortium plans to give job health and safety training to 7500 California hazardous waste workers during the next five years.

The new "TSD" (treatment, storage, and disposal) course provides 24 hours of training over a three-day period. It will be offered several times between April and June, 1989 in the San Francisco Bay Area, with exact locations to be announced.

The course is designed to meet worker training requirements of federal OSHA's Interim Final Rule (29 CFR 1910.120) governing health and safety at hazardous waste TSD facilities. These facilities are regulated under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) and require a special permit to operate. (LOHP can help workers determine whether their site has such a permit.)



Employees at these facilities often work with hazardous waste stored in drums or tanks; handle disposal of toxics into landfills, lagoons, or waste piles; and/or perform hazardous waste treatment processes involving dechlorination, incineration, oxidation, or solidification and stabilization.

The course curriculum will combine interactive group exercises and problem-solving techniques with workers' own on-the-job experiences. Topics to be covered include hazard identification, how toxics affect the body, medical surveillance, use of monitoring equipment including hands-on demonstrations, respirators and other personal protective equipment, work in confined spaces, decontamination, handling spills, legal requirements, and workers' rights under the OSHA standard.

LOHP's Hazardous Waste Project staff has already begun recruitment for these courses by targeting six unions that represent a majority of workers at unionized Northern California waste sites with RCRA permits: Electrical Workers (IBEW); Machinists (IAM); Teamsters (IBT); Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW); Longshoremans (ILWU); and Government Employees (AFGE). Project staff have helped the unions identify workers who need training, and are now working jointly with the unions to approach employers about releasing workers to attend. While recruitment has focused on union-represented workers, the courses are open to any worker at a TSD site with a RCRA permit.

Registration for the three-day course is \$150 per person for private sector organizations and \$75 per person for public sector organizations. Training can be tailored to the hazards of a particular worksite if there are sufficient registrations from the site to fill one class session (30 students). For more information about the courses, a course brochure, or copies of sample training materials, please call Gail Bateson or Betty Szudy at LOHP, (415) 642-5507.

—Betty Szudy, LOHP

*Workplace and Community Exposure***May Conference Will Target "Lead Poisoning in California"**

On Thursday, May 4, 1989, several state agencies and other groups will sponsor a day-long conference, **Lead Poisoning in California: Responding to Lead Hazards in Your Community**, at the University of California's Clark Kerr Conference Center in Berkeley.

The conference will emphasize screening, treatment, and prevention of lead poisoning among both working adults and other members of the community, especially children. Exposure to lead continues to pose a serious public health threat in California. Over 3,000 cases of lead poisoning were reported among occupationally exposed adults in the state

in 1988. In certain high-risk geographical areas in California, 20% of all children have elevated blood lead levels.

Designed for health and medical professionals, building contractors and inspectors, and members of concerned community groups including unions, the conference will explain local, state, and federal regulations related to control of lead in the workplace, the environment, and the community. Other important themes will be prevention of lead poisoning, lead removal from buildings, and new state protocols for responding to childhood lead poisoning cases. Conference sponsors include the California Public

Health Association (North); the Occupational Health Surveillance and Evaluation Program and the Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Project of the California Department of Health Services; the American Academy of Pediatrics; the California Medical Association's Environmental Health Committee; and the University of California's Northern California Occupational Health Center (with which LOHP is affiliated).

Fee is \$30., with special discounts available for students. Advance registration is strongly encouraged. For further information, please contact Lela Morris at LOHP, (415) 642-5507.

*Unionists in the Classroom*

## Second Annual "Labor Education Week" at Oakland Technical High School

Oakland Technical High School sponsored its second annual Labor Education Week in early January, 1989. The faculty at Oakland Tech, an urban, multi-racial public high school in the Bay Area, once again worked with local labor unions and labor education programs to organize a week of special events. The project was designed to introduce students to the history, accomplishments, and present struggles of the labor movement. (See *Monitor*, Spring 1988, page 4, for a report on last year's Labor Education Week at the school.)

As in 1988, LOHP staff participated enthusiastically. The week included classroom presentations by experienced unionists and labor educators on labor history, workers' rights, health hazards on the job, collective bargaining, and labor law. Local building trades unions held a "Trades Career Day" during the week, giving students an opportunity to talk with apprenticeship staff from several trades. Later in the year, students will make field trips to several Bay Area unionized worksites, including Cutter Laboratories and the Bay Bridge.

Several of this year's Labor Education Week activities connected labor themes to the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday on January 16. There were classes and discussions about labor and the civil rights movement and about the history of Black trade unionists in both the U.S. and Africa. A video on the life of A. Philip Randolph, civil rights leader and former president of the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters, was shown by members of the Bay Area chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

The University of California's Center for Labor Research and Education (with which LOHP is affiliated) plans to publish a booklet later this year based on the labor education experience at Oakland Tech. It will be available to schools and unions interested in initiating similar programs. Please contact the Labor Center at (415) 642-0323 after April 15th for further information.

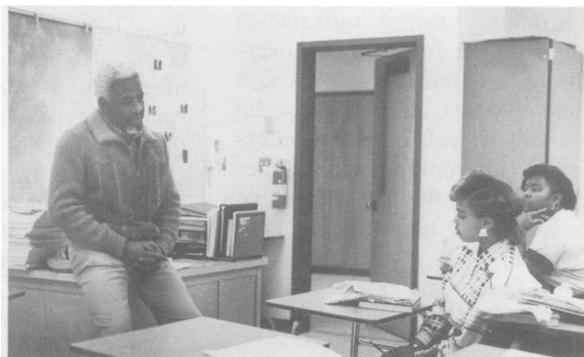
The accompanying photos provide a glimpse of this year's Labor Education Week at Oakland Tech.

—Betty Szudy, LOHP

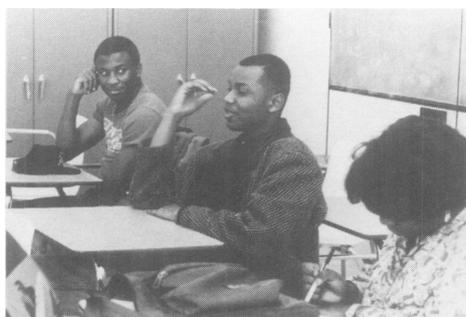


(Photo copyright (c) Ken Light.)

*Bill Lloyd, Business Representative of SEIU Local 790 and a member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, addresses a class. (Photo: Judy Shattuck.)*



*Leo Robinson, a member of the International Longshoremen (ILWU) and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, shares labor experiences. (Photo: Judy Shattuck.)*



*(Left:) Joan Braconi of the U.C. Center for Labor Research and Education makes a presentation. (Center and right:) Oakland Tech students were enthusiastic and interested. (Photos: Judy Shattuck.)*

## **HOMEWORK**

*continued from page 7*

hours, premium overtime, child labor, and recordkeeping. A registration system for homework employers was established.

The FLSA also failed to control or eliminate homework. In a series of hearings between 1940 and 1943, the Dept. of Labor concluded that regulation of homework in certain industries was impossible, and that consequently the FLSA could not be enforced in those industries without a complete homework ban. Witnesses at the hearings pointed out that homework is easily hidden and that, if inspectors cannot find it, it cannot be inspected. Enforcement of wage, hour, and child labor laws, witnesses said, depend upon accurate records showing who worked and when they worked, and no one can assure the accuracy of such records without the constant presence of an inspector in every home, which is obviously impossible. It is also difficult to tell what the hourly wage is when employers pay piecework rates.

Consequently, in 1942 the Dept. of Labor banned industrial homework in seven industries: knitted outerwear, women's apparel, embroidery, handkerchiefs, buttons and buckles, gloves and mittens, and jewelry. These were the industries where the bulk of homeworkers were believed to be employed at that time. Limited exceptions to the ban were made for workers who were homebound due to disability or age.

This ban was never challenged until the early days of the Reagan administration in 1981.

### **LIFTING THE BAN**

At the beginning of the 1980s, the labor movement responded to the re-emergence

of the home sweatshop in the garment industry by pushing for stronger enforcement of the homework ban. It responded to the growth of telecommuting and other home clerical work by advocating new restrictions on these types of jobs. But the newly-elected Reagan administration instead sought the opposite. In May, 1981, claiming it was acting in defense of workers' individual liberty and in the spirit of deregulation, it proposed to lift the 1942 ban and legalize most work at home.

Jay Mazur of the Ladies' Garment Workers wrote that "even the arch-conservative ideologues of the Reagan Administration would not dare to repeal the minimum wage, or the ban on child labor, or the basic protections of worker safety which the labor movement has gained over so many decades." But, Mazur said, legalizing homework would "effectively repeal these basic labor standards for our most vulnerable workers."

Unions and others fought the proposal to legalize homework. In 1984, after a political and legal battle, the Reagan administration's Dept. of Labor put into effect a revised plan which removed the ban in one industry only—knitted outerwear. In place of the ban, the government began a system of registration for manufacturers. It was the failure of similar state and federal registration systems, and the U.S. Dept. of Labor's finding in the 1940s that they were impossible to enforce, which had made the ban necessary in the first place.

Next the Reagan Dept. of Labor proposed even more permissive homework rules, which were implemented in January, 1989. The ban was ended and replaced with a registration system in five more industries: embroidery, handkerchiefs, buttons and buckles, gloves and mittens, and some jewelry.

The largest area of manufacturing sub-

ject to the 1942 homework ban, women's apparel, was unaffected. Thus it is now the only industry where homework is illegal. But the incoming Bush administration has said it intends to end this ban as well.

In January, 1989, unions and others filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., seeking to reinstate the homework ban in all the recently deregulated industries, including knitted outerwear. The plaintiffs were ILGWU, ACTWU, SEIU, and several of their locals; three apparel industry employer associations; and the states of New York and Pennsylvania (which ban homework by state law).

The suit specifically attacks the government's weak enforcement of labor laws in knitted outerwear homework operations. Since homework was legalized in that industry in 1984, the suit says, federal efforts to monitor it have been "inadequate" and "insufficient." According to the plaintiffs, this poor enforcement record demonstrates that the government cannot protect against potentially widespread violations in the five new fields.

Mazur of the Ladies' Garment Workers notes that in knitted outerwear since 1984 "few employers have registered, and in most of those cases the employers have been fined for violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act. ... Little effort has been made to find homework operations which fail to register."

"The government investigates homework primarily on a complaint-only basis," Mazur says, "despite the clear evidence that homeworkers, out of fear and desperation, rarely complain."

A hearing on the lawsuit is expected soon. Meanwhile, homework is still very much with us. In the climate of the 1980s, the battle against its abuses will be a tough one.

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