

LABOR CENTER REPORTER

BERKELEY, CA 94720
(415) 642-0323

Number 188
July 1986

INJURED WORKERS UNITED--PART I

by Pamela Telewis

LCR recently interviewed Shirley Conrad of the San Jose based group, Injured Workers United (IWU). This interview is in two parts. This is part one.

LCR: *What does Injured Workers United do?*

SC: IWU is a mutual aid workers' advocacy group made up of injured or ill workers. About 75% of our membership are chemically injured workers from the semiconductor and electronics industries. We offer support, recognition of both the illness and the horrors of the workers' compensation system, and a way to get involved and fight back and change the situation.

LCR: *How did IWU get started?*

SC: Our parent organization, the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health (SCCOSH) ran a hazard hotline, which workers could call if they were working with or exposed to chemicals. Workers started calling, expressing a lot of anger and frustration, and describing the amount of stress and poverty involved in being an injured worker. SCCOSH then set up a house meeting for the injured workers. After a few months of meetings, hard work, and a grant from the Catholic Church, that group formed Chemically Injured Workers, which expanded in 1984-5 to include any ill or injured worker, and became IWU. The group provides support but also taps the potential and ability of workers as Workers Compensation experts and experts on chemicals.

LCR: *Who calls you for help?*

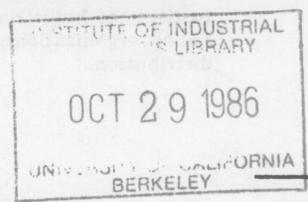
SC: Our calls fall into three categories. The first consists of calls for information, from all over the country. That includes information on chemicals and information on how to form an injured workers group. Another category includes workers who recognize their illness and recognize where it's coming from, but have not received any response from their employers and need medical and legal help. The other category is workers who are still on the job and are terrified by what they work with and want to know how dangerous the chemicals are. Most of these are anonymous phone calls from people who are too frightened to trust even an injured workers organization.

Since we began accepting more than just chemical injury cases, our calls have run two non-chemical cases for each chemical case. That, to me, says two things. One is that there is tremendous need for this service and, two, that the intimidation campaign being waged by the electronics industry is working.

LCR: *What services do you provide?*

SC: We have a general and emergency referral service through which we help people with food, shelter, clothing, PG&E counseling, and that type of thing. We have a medical, legal and rehabilitation referral service. All of the people on our list are worker approved. We also provide benefit information on Workers Compensation, SDI, and Social Security.

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LCR: *I understand that workers who are helped by IWU are asked to remain in the group to assist other workers who need their expertise and support. How does that work?*

SC: We have a worker referral service, in which we link a worker up with another worker with a similar illness or a similar type of case. We use the buddy system and the more experienced worker helps the buddy through and brings him or her to the membership meetings, which we have once a month. Each meeting has a built-in rap session so that workers can discuss their problems and at least have the reality of their illnesses recognized and acknowledged by others, so they are not struggling all alone, which is about 90% of the fight. The other 10% is re-shaping the battered self esteem.

Once that's done, these workers are some of the most powerful worker and safety advocates I've ever seen. They've been knocked around every way possible so nothing scares them anymore. They're testifying before the State Legislature and becoming recognized as experts.

LCR: *What's special about chemical cases?*

SC: Let me give you an example. One worker was an auto detailer who worked with a cleanser which said on the can "DO NOT HEAT." Well, the cars sat out in the lot all day long getting hot. He'd spray the cleanser on the vinyl and he said the fumes were so bad that he'd have to spray the stuff on, jump outside the car, gasp, take a deep breath, then go back in. The chemical made him dizzy and on one of his trips delivering cars to the second floor, he fell off of a plank and permanently injured his back. The companies are still denying his case and they're not even seriously looking at the chemical aspect of it.

There's an amazing number of jobs in which workers are exposed to chemicals. We're finding that it's not just in the semiconductor industry. It's slipping into the trades, especially the building trades. People get sick from the materials they use and from going in to repair the buildings.

Most physicians get only two weeks of occupational health in their whole training. Every worker is a potential victim of a workplace hazard and that's not even considered in the process of discovery of an illness. So we've put a lot of effort into medical and rehabilitation education.

Workers with chemical cases have it worse legally too. Chemical cases are less well understood and recognized. Even ordinary Workers Compensation cases take anywhere from two to four years to settle and average settlements run from ten to twenty thousand dollars. Chemical cases take an average of four to ten years and average settlements run from four to seven thousand dollars. That does not compensate people.

LCR: *What can labor unions do to increase awareness of workplace hazards and to help workers who have been injured?*

SC: I think the most important thing is for workers to be taught how to document what happens at the workplace, so that when something happens that seems unusual or even if they just get a gut level feeling, to go with it and write that down.

It's really important for union representatives to know as much as they can about potential workplace hazards that workers do get into.

We service a lot of injured workers who are union members. Unions need to look at the problems of injured workers. Injured workers are their forgotten members. A lot of times injured workers feel desperate and alone. It's the time they need to know that the union still cares about them. Even if unions can't help them directly, they can refer workers to groups like ours or put money into forming other injured workers groups.

We all need to remember that all of us are potential victims of a workplace accident. We can't believe the myth that our employers will protect us if we just follow the rules. When workers see injustice in the workplace, they need to talk to their reps and try to bring about change.

-- Pamela Tellew