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LOHP AIDS PROJECT

by Amelia Preece

In Boston a person with AIDS returned to work at the New England Telephone Company after spending months fighting the case in courts. The court had ruled that having AIDS is a handicap under the law and therefore it is unlawful to discriminate against an such an employee. The return of this worker caused 29 of the 39 technicians who normally worked in the building with him to refuse to enter the building. The union was caught between protecting the right of the person with AIDS to work and protecting workers whose fear of exposure to AIDS caused them to walk off the job. In other cases, workers with AIDS have been fired or were forced to go on leave because they had AIDS. Some workers without AIDS have been fired because their employer feared they had AIDS.

If workers and employers were better informed about AIDS, such workplace controversies would not arise. AIDS can only be transmitted through blood or semen. There is no evidence of transmission by casual contact, such as by touching people with AIDS, eating food prepared by someone with AIDS, or through eating utensils, telephones, swimming pools, or mosquitoes.

Unions and the LOHP AIDS Project -- Unions must address the problems caused by this disease. Workers with AIDS must be protected from discrimination by employers, while the fears of other employees about exposure to AIDS addressed.

The Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) of the Institute of Industrial Relations, U.C. Berkeley, has recently created an educational program for unions to deal with the problems of AIDS in the workplace. LOHP's AIDS project can provide information and assistance to unions interested in developing policies both to protect workers from occupational exposure to AIDS and to protect workers with AIDS and ARC from firings and harassment.

AIDS is a fatal disease which has become a medical crisis in recent years. The Center for Disease Control counts 29,003 persons with this disease in the U.S. A federal report estimates this count will grow to 270,000 in the next five years. These figures underestimate the number of people affected because many more have AIDS Related Complex (ARC) or have been exposed to the virus responsible for AIDS. ARC includes problems of the immunity system caused by the same virus, but not developed into the symptoms covered in the medical definition of AIDS. ARC can be a disabling and sometimes deadly disease with a wide variety of symptoms. It may or may not develop into AIDS. There are from 100,000 to 200,000 people today who have ARC. From 1 to 2 million people have antibodies to the AIDS virus; many of these may never get AIDS or ARC. However, people who have been exposed to the virus may be as infectious as individuals who have AIDS or ARC.

No Risk to Most Workers -- According the The Centers for Disease Control, "The kind of nonsexual person-to-person contact that generally occurs among workers and clients or consumers in the workplace does not pose a risk of the transmission of the AIDS virus." Studies of families in which one family member has AIDS show that AIDS is not spread through casual contact. In these families, other family members have not contracted AIDS and have not been exposed to the AIDS virus except through sexual contact or blood. There was no other spread of the virus even though many of these families took no special precautions to prevent the spread of AIDS.

Although small amounts of the virus have been found in tears, saliva, breast milk, and urine, the amounts found are too small for transmission. Transmission has been found

only through the exchange of blood and semen. An individual is put at risk for AIDS when he or she engages in unprotected sex (not using a condom) with infected men or women or when needles are shared. While some people have been infected through blood transfusions, this source has been largely eliminated with blood tests which screen out infected blood. Infection has occurred at birth when the mother was infected.

Hospital Workers -- In occupations where workers deal with blood and blood products, mainly in hospitals, there is a risk of the spread of AIDS on the job. The LOHP AIDS project will provide information on safety measures essential to protect workers from exposure, and will assist unions in developing policies and training programs for on-job protection. However, even in medical situations where patients have AIDS, the spread of AIDS is very uncommon. One study (among several on the same subject) followed 666 hospital workers who had direct exposure to the blood of patients with the AIDS virus, through needle-sticks, cuts or exposure to mucus membranes. Twenty six of these 666 tested positive for the AIDS virus. All but three of these 26 had *other* AIDS risk factors. One of the three was anonymous so that risk factors could not be evaluated. Therefore in only two cases out of 666 was the exposure probably on the job. These two were cases in which the injuries were more severe than normal needlesticks. For example, one exposed person's hand was impaled on the needle. Although extreme care must be taken when dealing with the blood and semen of those exposed to the AIDS virus, the evidence shows that the spread of AIDS is not easy even under the most vulnerable working conditions.

What Unions Can Do -- In most workplaces education programs can reduce unfounded fears of AIDS. The LOHP project will assist in creating union programs to inform all workers about AIDS and to protect workers with AIDS and ARC from harassment and unfair dismissal.

It is important that people with AIDS be allowed to continue working since they pose no threat to other workers or customers. Allowing people with AIDS to continue working as long as they are able improves their well being by reducing isolation, reducing the stress of unemployment, assuring some economic security, and preventing them from resorting to government assistance. Employment allows such workers to continue to contribute to society and reduces the cost of caring for patients with AIDS. As drugs are developed to increase the life expectancy of AIDS patients, and as their numbers increase, the importance of accepting them in the work force will increase.

The issue of AIDS is best addressed in the workplace before anyone is found to have AIDS, because emotions are not so high and there is less fear of misleading information. Management also has a responsibility and an interest in providing employees with information about AIDS. In states where AIDS is considered a handicap, it is illegal to fire a worker who is thus handicapped as long as he or she is able to do the work without risk to other workers.

The LOHP Library has publications, research articles and training materials related to AIDS and ARC in the workplace. These are available to the public. The LOHP project will help unions set up programs which inform workers on the epidemiology of AIDS, modes of transmission, occupational exposure, recommended work practices of certain occupations, federal and state law and regulations which prohibit discrimination against people with AIDS, and the use of these legal tools in grievances procedures and contract negotiations. Although the project is designed to provide unions in Northern California with information about AIDS in the workplace, LOHP will be able to refer others with questions about AIDS to the appropriate resources.

For More Information - The LOHP AIDS project is funded by the California Department of Health Services and therefore all its services are *free*. The project's advisory committee includes representatives from Service Employees International Union, Communication Workers of America, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, California State Employees Association and the San Francisco Labor Council. Unions or individuals interested in more information about AIDS in the workplace or in the programs of the LOHP AIDS project can contact; Elaine Askari, AIDS LABOR EDUCATION PROJECT, LABOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PROGRAM, 2521 Channing Way, Berkeley, California 94720, or call (415) 642-5507.

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