

Protecting Women or All Workers?

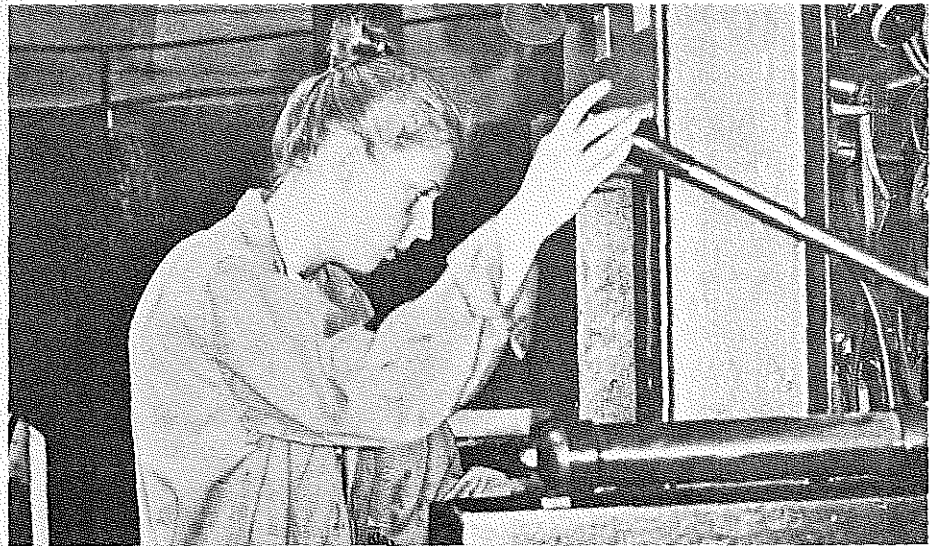
A controversy grows as more women take jobs in nontraditional industries.

The recent action by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to protect women workers at the American Cyanamid Company at Willow Island, West Virginia, is an interesting development in a growing controversy.

The OSHA ruling that Cyanamid must correct work conditions potentially hazardous to fetuses came after four women workers at the plant disclosed that they had been voluntarily sterilized so that they could continue to work in sections of the plant using chemicals that might affect either their unborn children or their ability to bear children. The alternative would have been transfer to safer sections of the plant, where pay would have been lower.

As women have increasingly entered formerly all-male occupations, a number of companies have begun to force this kind of transfer. Most notable is General Motors, which has acted to keep women out of workplaces exposed to lead—and thus out of some high-paying jobs.

The employers in the controversy assert that exclusion of fertile women from certain jobs is justified because lowering the exposure level to certain substances is either technologically or economically impractical. Parts of a plant may be perfectly safe for adults, they argue, but still potentially hazardous for fetuses, since they are much more sensitive to toxic agents. Nor can they limit exclusion to pregnant women, they say, because a large percentage of pregnancies are unplanned, and diagnosis of pregnancy usually occurs several weeks after conception, by which time damage may already have



B.C. Federation of Labor

Women in nontraditional jobs are the subject of growing controversy.

been done. In any case, they argue, exclusion affects negligible numbers of women, since so few are employed in the industries in question.

This point of view is attacked vehemently by trade unions and feminist groups. They argue that it is based on the questionable assumption that any woman of childbearing age will choose to have children. It ignores a woman's ability to choose not to become pregnant or to remove herself voluntarily from a workplace if notified of a potential danger.

Even more important, they argue, this policy fails to recognize that certain substances may have an equally toxic effect on the male reproductive system; that a damaged fetus may result from a damaged sperm as well as from a damaged egg. They claim that the employers fail to make a distinction between a mutagen and a teratogen. A mutagen can cause basic genetic changes in male or female reproductive cells, while a teratogen interferes with the development of the fetus after con-

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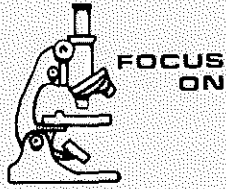
In Memoriam

WOHRC mourns the tragic and unnecessary death of Marilyn McCusker, the first woman miner killed underground in the United States. Nearly 1,300 miners have died similar deaths in the last 10 years—some 103,000 in this century—because adequate safety precautions are still not in force in many mines.

Ms. McCusker was a brave

woman who fought through the courts to become a miner. Ironically, her husband must now bring suit to collect survivors' benefits.

Our best memorial to Marilyn McCusker will be a continuing struggle to ensure a safe workplace for all Americans—and equal rights for dependents of either sex.



Meat Processing:

Workers must fend off cuts, strains,

Meat processing and packing is one of the most dangerous of all industries. Its incidence of illness and injury is often higher than those of such heavy industries as steel and construction. In 1977, for instance, the injury-illness rate in iron and steel foundries was 24.4 per 100 full-time workers. In meat products plants it was 28.8.

The hazards of the industry include cuts and gashes from butchers' knives and saws, strains from handling heavy carcasses, falls on wet and blood-soaked floors, infections from animal diseases, overexposure to refrigerator temperatures, damage to blood vessels caused by prolonged standing, and skin infections caused by exposure to animal fat and chemical solutions.

Meat Wrappers Asthma

An occupational disease that is prevalent among women in the industry is meat wrappers asthma, a condition that can range from mild eye, nose and throat irritation to wheezing and difficulty in breathing, chest pains, coughing, nausea, muscle pains, chills, and fever. The more severe symptoms are more likely to occur in smokers and those with a history of allergies and other respiratory problems. Ninety-eight percent of all meat wrappers are women.

Although all the causes of the condition are not yet known, it seems to



Local 342, Amalgamated Meat Cutters

The machine this meat wrapper is using emits fumes that cause "meat wrappers asthma," a condition prevalent in the industry. Ninety-eight percent of all meat wrappers are women.

arise from the fumes generated by the meat wrapping material—polyvinyl chloride (PVC)—when it is cut on a hot wire and sealed on a heated sealing pad—the processes commonly used in the industry.

The chief culprit seems to be the chemical that plasticizes the wrapper, dioctyl adipate, which accounts for 30 percent of the film's composition. Unlike phthalate plasticizers, to date no threshold limit value (TLV) has been published for dioctyl adipate fumes.

A second irritating factor is probably hydrogen chloride (HCl), which is also produced by the cutting with heated wire. The TLV for HCl is a maximum of 5 parts per million (ppm).

Still other toxic fumes are released by the glue on the price labels, which are also affixed by heat. Its main ingredient, when heated, gives off phthalic anhydride, a potent eye, skin and upper respiratory irritant. The TLV for this fume is 2 ppm averaged over an eight hour day.

Prevention: The only way to eliminate the dioctyl adipate fumes entirely is to replace the hot cutting wire with a mechanical blade or some other

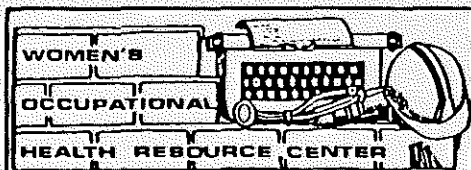
"cold" device. If this is not immediately possible, the wire temperature should be set as low as possible, as should the temperature on sealing pads and price labels. The tension on the machine roll should be set so that the film retreats a bit after being cut to prevent it from smoldering on the wire. Cutting wires and sealing pads should be cleaned frequently.

If fume emissions cannot be controlled, local ventilation systems that capture and dispose of fumes should be installed.

Standing

Workers in the meat industry are generally required to stand for many hours a day. This can cause pressure on the blood vessels in the legs and dilation of the veins, especially if the muscular vein walls have already been weakened by pregnancy or excess weight. Dilation of the veins can cause blood to accumulate and lead to swelling of the feet and ankles. Some authorities think that prolonged standing can lead to a weakening of the vein walls. It can also cause strain and pain in the thigh muscles.

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(Subscription information on page 6.)

FACT SHEET

The Pregnancy Discrimination Act

For many years, a woman's steady employment was jeopardized by her decision to have a child. Some employers tended to fire a pregnant employee rather than allow a reasonable period of maternity leave. When leave was granted it was often without pay or medical benefits, even though disability and medical fringe benefits were part of the regular employment contract. Such exclusions financially burdened women workers and broke down the continuity of their employment, thus reinforcing the woman's role as a temporary worker.

In response to this type of discrimination, and the Supreme Court's decision to allow employer benefit plans to exclude pregnancy coverage, various labor, feminist, and legal organizations sought legislative change in Congress.

On April 29, 1979, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, an amendment to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, went into effect. The Act makes clear that discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions constitutes unlawful sex discrimination. A woman is, therefore, protected against being fired or refused a job or a promotion because she is pregnant or has had an abortion. Moreover, a pregnant woman who goes on leave is entitled to have her job back with no less in seniority when she returns, just as other employees on disability leave for other medical conditions are entitled to their jobs upon their return.

The same principle applies in the area of fringe benefits, such as sick leave, disability benefits and health insurance. A woman unable to work for pregnancy-related conditions is entitled to disability benefits or sick leave on the same basis as employees unable to work for other reasons. Any health insurance plan provided by the employer must cover expenses for pregnancy-related conditions to the same extent that it provides coverage for other medical conditions.

Application of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act to Disability/Health Insurance Plans

- 1) *Provision of Insurance* - The Act does not require each employer to provide a comprehensive disability/health insurance plan but applies to those employers who currently have a plan or will implement one in the future.
- 2) *Pre-existing Pregnancy* - A woman whose pregnancy started before employment began may be excluded from coverage under a company plan as long as the exclusion also applies, and on the same basis, to other conditions pre-existing before employment.



District 1199, NUHHCE

Pregnant workers are protected by the new law.

- 3) *Medical Examinations* - An employer can require a medical examination by a company physician to confirm the existence of a pregnancy-related condition, but only if such an examination procedure is normally required evenhandedly of all applicants for disability benefits.
- 4) *Time Limitation of Payments* - A company may legally limit the number of weeks it will pay disability and sick leave benefits, even if the disability surpasses the limitation, but only if the cap on payments applies equally to all conditions.
- 5) *Abortion* - Health insurance coverage for expenses arising from abortion is not required except where the life of the mother would be endangered if the fetus were carried to term, or where medical complications have arisen from an abortion. All other benefits, such as sick leave, however, must be provided for employees who have abortions.
- 6) *Optional Coverage* - An employer may not provide a policy with coverage for pregnancy-related conditions

as an option. Every company plan must cover such conditions.

7) *Shared Cost* - The additional cost of compliance with the Act may be apportioned between the employer and the employees in the same proportion that the entire fringe benefit plan is apportioned. Under no circumstances must male or female employees be required to pay unequal proportions on the basis of sex or pregnancy.

For further information, you may contact the WOHRC office for a copy of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's booklet, *Questions and Answers on the Pregnancy Discrimination Act*. There is a charge of 75 cents per copy, plus a 50 cent handling charge. There is no additional handling charge for large orders. —Gary Epler, Legal Intern, WOHRC

For separate copies of this fact sheet and updates of information on reproductive rights, write to WOHRC.

Activities Roundup

New WOHRC Calendar

Women's Health/Women's Work '80, an unusual illustrated fact pack and calendar is now available from WOHRC. The handsome calendar, perfect for gift-giving, combines 12 photographs of women at work in a variety of occupations with 12 informative and easy-to-read factsheets on aspects of health and safety on the job. The calendar portion is removable, so that the photos and facts may be kept as a permanent addition to one's library.

Some of the subjects covered by the factsheet are: back injuries and lifting, provisions of the new pregnancy disability law, health hazards in laboratories, office workers' health and safety, and hazards of textile work.

The calendar costs \$5 and may be ordered at the address on the masthead on Page 6.



UAW
A photograph from the calendar

Health Book Party

A tenth anniversary party for the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Inc. was held on Sunday, November 4, at the New York Sheraton Hotel. The publishers of the feminist health classics, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *Ourselves and Our Children* were hailed by such celebrities as Marlo Thomas, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, New York City Council President Carol Bellamy and authors Robin Morgan, Shere Hite and Barbara Seaman. The party was a benefit for the National Women's Health Network.

Lead Book in French

The pamphlet, *Lead: New Perspectives on an Old Problem*, written by WOHRC staff, has been translated into French by the United Automobile Workers of Quebec. The booklet covers the dangers of exposure to lead and the controversy over transfer of women workers from jobs in high lead areas.

Copies of the 21-page photo offset booklet can be ordered from: Travailleurs Unis de l'Automobile (TUA), 7811 L.H. Lafontaine, Suite 203, Ville d'Anjou, Province de Quebec, Canada, H1K 4E4.

Textile Conference

The Women's Bureau and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration will jointly sponsor a conference for working women in the textile industry on December 8 in Charlotte, North Carolina. The all-day conference, which is cosponsored by the Coalition of Labor Union Women, will be held at the Charlotte YWCA.

For further information, call Chris Aaron at (202) 523-7242.

A Dangerous Industry

infections and meat wrappers asthma.



Local 342, Amalgamated Meat Cutters

Standing for many hours a day, lifting heavy trays and often working in cold temperatures are occupational hazards for women like these in the meat processing and packaging industry.

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For prevention of these conditions, jobs should be designed to permit workers to sit down at regular intervals. If this is not feasible, jobs should be rotated between those requiring sitting and standing.

Infectious Diseases

Brucellosis and *psittacosis* are two infectious diseases transmitted by animals to human beings, and a possible threat to meat processing workers. *Brucellosis* is transmitted by cattle and swine, particularly the latter, and *psittacosis* by fowl. Both usually take the form of a particular outbreak when a diseased animal or animals have been handled. *Brucellosis* symptoms include fever, headache, pains in the joints, night sweats and loss of appetite—although blood samples from some patients have shown the presence of infectious organisms without any symptoms.

Psittacosis symptoms include fever, chills, profuse sweating, headache and body aches. Both illnesses can become severe enough to necessitate hospitalization. Both seem to be caused not only by direct handling, including

packaging, of the diseased carcasses, but by inhaling air in a plant where the infection is present.

Prevention: The only sure way to eliminate these diseases is to make sure that infected animals are not introduced into meat packing plants. However, good air exhaust systems and rigorous plant hygiene can help.

Skin diseases

A variety of skin irritations and diseases can be caused by fat-soiled clothing, exposure to brine solutions, temperature extremes, steam and water. Meat industry workers have an unusually high incidence of warts and inflammation in small wounds. The warts have been attributed to the accumulation of two-to-three-day-old blood in the bottom of the meat cartons.

To care for inflammations, full first aid facilities should be provided and used by trained personnel. Hygienic precautions should include well-maintained washing and sanitary facilities, including showers where practicable. Protective creams and lotions should be provided, and protective clothing

worn. It should be light colored and laundered frequently.

Cold

Meat processing workers who do their jobs in heavily refrigerated sections of a plant are susceptible to frostbite and may develop a predisposition to diseases such as influenza. Many also report a "pins and needles" sensation in their fingers, which they attribute to the cold.

Prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures may also cause work accidents. Persons exposed to cold should be provided with protective clothing and rest periods in a warm area.

Accidents

Movement of heavy and awkward carcasses may cause *strains of the back and shoulders*. The well planned use of rails and hooks can prevent this, as can training in lifting and handling.

Wet and greasy floors can cause slips and *falls*. Floors should be constructed of non-slip materials. Rigorous cleanliness and sloping and drainage of floors to prevent water accumulation are necessary. Footwear should have non-slip soles.

Cuts are common among butchery workers. Knives should be kept sharp, so that they cut easily, with no extra force necessary. Handles should be well designed. Workers should be taught to use them with maximum safety precautions. Suitable protective clothing should be provided. Aprons of metal mesh are recommended, even though some workers resist wearing them because of their weight. However, it is suggested that suspenders be worn with the aprons to lessen the drag on the neck.

Hand and arm guards, as well as finger stalls or gloves of chain mail are also recommended. With some machines, however, metal mesh gloves should be avoided because they can too easily be caught in the choppers.

When power saws are used, there should be guards for the dangerous parts.

UAW on Safety

Workers in many industries may profit from a thoroughgoing and handsomely produced guide to health and safety in automobile plants just published by the United Automobile Workers of America. *What Every UAW Representative Should Know About Health and Safety*, prepared by the union's Social Security Department, contains information about particularly hazardous occupations, laws that protect workers and how to use them, and hazard recognition and control.

Particularly interesting is a section on the worker's rights—and lack of rights—to refuse unsafe work, a graph showing how speedup increases injuries, and a list of sobering statistics on the extent of work-related hazards and diseases. Most striking is the assertion that, "More American workers die each year as a result of their jobs than GIs did in any year of World War II."

The 24-page, illustrated booklet can be ordered for \$1 a copy from the UAW Purchasing and Supply Department, 8000 East Jefferson, Detroit, Mich. 48214. Specify publication number 449.

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ception. Exposure to a teratogen would require protection only of females, but both sexes should be protected against exposure to mutagens.

A well known example of a mutagen is vinyl chloride, widely used in the manufacture of plastics. An excess of birth defects in communities near vinyl chloride plants has been reported.

Probably the most debated toxin is lead. However, lead has also been shown to cause sterility in men by interfering with the production of sperm and to cause spontaneous abortions in the wives of male workers who are exposed to it. Furthermore, lead can cause nervous disorders, liver and blood diseases in adults or children exposed to it over a period of time. Thus it is dubious safety policy to exclude only women from workplaces with a high lead exposure.

The chief concern of the employers, argue unionists and feminists, is not so much the health of their workers as the fear of future lawsuits brought in behalf of defective offspring. Under present state workmen's compensation laws, liability to employees is limited, but offspring are not covered and thus retain their right to sue. In court, it would be easier to prove that a birth defect resulted from the exposure of a mother rather than a father.

A recently formed Coalition for the Reproductive Rights of Workers has called upon OSHA and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

(EEOC) to issue guidelines covering conditions under which one sex may be excluded from a given workplace. The Coalition's position is that an exclusionary policy can be justified only if the employer can prove that: 1) it has cleaned up the workplace in compliance with OSHA regulations; 2) substantial scientific evidence exists on the effects of the substance in question on both sexes; 3) this evidence shows that the risk is to only one sex or group; 4) no alternative means exist for reducing or eliminating the risk; 5) the company's policy is to displace as few workers as possible, and that these workers are assured of the same pay rate and seniority after transfer.

The controversy will probably continue to rage until more is known about the relationship between reproduction and toxic substances. Very few of the 20,000 substances commonly found in the workplace have been tested for reproductive effects.

The Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto recently summarized the issue by calling for "legislation which requires that all workplace substances be tested for health effects, including reproductive effects. Legal standards should be drawn up on the basis of these tests, to limit exposures of all workers to non-toxic amounts of the hazardous agents."

Until this is accomplished, it is clear that no policy should force a worker to choose between health and economic well being.



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