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Cancer in Auto Factories

Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*. [<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id123.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]



By Mike Westfall

CANCER IN AUTO FACTORIES

Mike Bennett / Mike Westfall Interview

3-20-2009

Auto plants are not the healthiest of places to work. Different departments in different types of factories hold various health risks. Over the years, auto workers have had to deal with the questionable health hazards of paint and welding fumes, the production and plating of die cast parts, foundry work, wood working, asbestos insulation on deteriorating overhead pipes, cutting fluids and many other potentially serious health dangers where identifiable toxic chemicals were present and suspect. Many times grave health issues that might come from workplace exposure have not surfaced until workers were older and retired.

Mike Bennett is the retired President of UAW Local 326 in Flint, Michigan, which represented General Motor's Flint Ternstedt casting and plating facility. He was also the UAW Local President representing workers at GM's Saturn facility in Springhill, Tennessee.

I invited Mike to participate in this interview because of his extensive experience and genuine concern for workers. I believe that one of Mike's greatest contributions to autoworkers was his steadfast fight to bring awareness to the issue of cancer in automobile production.

Mike Westfall:

Mike, I would like to welcome you and thank you for your participation in this interview.

Could you explain to our readers what Ternstedt produced, what years it opened and closed, how many people worked there and were there serious work related health issues at this plant?

Mike Bennett:

Ternstedt was an early auto parts company founded by the Swedish inventor Alvan K. Ternstedt who received a patent for the first practical window regulator in 1916 and later was financed by the Fisher Brothers in 1917. After the death of Mr. Ternstedt, the Fisher Body Corporation acquired the remaining stock shares. Ternstedt Inc. became a division of Fisher Body and in 1948 became a separate GM division. The original Ternstedt factory was located at Fort Street and Livornois in Detroit and produced window regulators; door handles, locks, wheel covers and many plated trim parts for GM, Ford, Chrysler and other auto industrial manufacturers. A fire destroyed the original Fort Street Ternstedt plant in Detroit and at the end of the Korean War in 1952 General Motors moved the hardware manufacturing operation to Coldwater Road north of Flint into a new building intended for the manufacturing of jet engines. In 1969, Ternstedt division was folded back

into the Fisher Body Guide division of GM, which eventually became Delphi.

At its peak the Ternstedt plant employed over 5,000 workers. I joined Ternstedt in 1964 as an apprentice pipefitter. The plant was a beehive of activity of various operations including stamping, plating, die casting, buffing and polishing, heat-treating, welding and assembly of many different auto components. I remember the first day I arrived in the plant and walked through the die casting area and you couldn't see 50 feet ahead for the smoke and fumes from the machines.

MW: Who first noticed that there was a problem with cancer at the plant?

MB: It was in the late 1970's that I began to notice an unusually large number of people dying of cancer at a

young age. People began to talk about it. In 1978, after being elected President of the Local, I began to collect death certificates of our members and began my own study of the death rate in 1980.

MW: Would you explain for our readers what part Whitey Hale played in the cancer issue?

MB: The Chairman of the Shop Committee at that time was Whitey Hale and he was very interested and supportive of collecting the information. Whitey went on to become the UAW top negotiator and raised the health issue at the National GM-UAW negotiations.

MW: Whitey shared pictures with me of a mouse covered with large cancerous tumors, which was caught in the plant. Could you give a little background to our readers on these pictures?

MB: In 1981, I released the findings of my own epidemiological study to the public. Some UAW members in the plant had noticed rodents in the plant with large tumors protruding out of them. One member caught one and brought it to us. We had the mouse tested and sure enough the tumor on the mouse was cancerous. The photo was evidence that the plant environment was killing rodents and humans together.

MW: During your tenure as President at UAW Local 326, the Flint Journal ran multiple articles about cancer at the Ternstedt plant. One such piece was a story in March of 1980 headlined "UAW, GM put a lid on cancer study". The article was about your 38-page study, which contended that cancer deaths at the Ternstedt plant were nearly twice the national average, and a leading cause of death for active and retired employees. Very abruptly these Flint Journal articles stopped. Why did they stop, was there a cover-up of your study and if so, by who? Was the cancer issue taken out of your hands? Did you face opposition from GM or UAW officials?

MB: Once my study became public, both the UAW International Union and General Motors questioned the scientific results of my study because I was a "lay-man". The International officers didn't want the story public and criticized me for releasing it. They assumed control of the study and discussions with GM. Eventually, they called in their own experts from the International Union safety department to review my findings. Dr. Michael Silverstein conducted his own epidemiological study and later confirmed my findings as entirely accurate. In the meantime, my regional representatives Jerry Mills, and UAW Vice-President Irving Bluestone had informed me that the International had assumed control of the findings and would handle the media.

MW: Mike, there is a very real human face to this story. What was it like being president to these worried workers? As president you must have had some lengthy discussions with seriously ill workers and widows. Could you elaborate?

MB: Once the story broke, the light bulb went on for many people as their observations were confirmed; too many people were dying at very young ages from cancer! Once it became public, hundreds of widows and family members came to the local union looking for answers. These family members were desperate for answers. What happens now? Do I have any rights in this matter? Who will provide for my family and me? All questions I didn't have answers for, except to say the International Union was now involved and handling it. I remember as if it were yesterday when the young widow with three children came to me asking if she and her children could receive her husband's pension as survivors. Her husband, whom I knew, died in his mid-40's of lung cancer. He never smoked and only lived a few months once diagnosed. He had 27 years service and his wife only received his life insurance and the "bridging benefit" under the contract. The bridge benefit provided only two years of income and didn't provide for her to collect as a surviving spouse at the time. How could she provide for children? What ever happened to her? The corporation and UAW International union ignored the responsibility for young widows like her and consequently they became casualties of neglect and indifference.

MW: Were there any protective governmental agencies or health organizations keeping an eye on this plant because of the health issues and what were their conclusions?

MB: Once the issue became public; the state became involved, after the fact. Air samples were taken in the plant and the data was reviewed. The state reported that there were an abnormal number of cancer deaths at the Coldwater Road plant and there were violations of clean air standards, but nothing was done other than public statements were being made.

MW: There was a Sloan Kettering cancer study done at the Ternstedt plant. Why was it done, do you have the findings of the study, were there any follow through tests and what were they? Once GM was made aware of the results of the study, what was their response and what did they do?

MB: Once the UAW International Union got the safety department involved, General Motors got Sloan Kettering involved. In my view GM was attempting to discredit my study and was looking for expertise to counter any report I did or may come out of the International. After several years Sloan Kettering confirmed my findings. All the information I had and the Sloan Kettering study was turned over to the International Union and I suppose it's buried in some file in the archives there.

MW: Did Ternstedt have similar sister plants in other areas? Do you know if these other sister plants had these same issues? When this plant closed where were the jobs transferred?

MB: At the time, there were seven Ternstedt sister plants and I had forwarded copies of my report to each of them. Again, the UAW International Union handled the situation and local unions at each of those plants. Often at our sub-counsel meeting, these local union leaders reported similar cancer rate concerns but I'm not aware of any studies being conducted or completed at any of these plants.

When the Coldwater Road plant closed much of the work in die-casting was outsourced and plating became outdated and obsolete. Plastic parts replaced die cast parts and chrome trim disappeared from the product line.

MW: We haven't touched yet on the obvious question of the surrounding area. How did this plant affect the neighborhood? Was there any contamination of the surrounding vicinity? Were neighbors who lived around this plant affected with potentially serious health issues and if so, in what way? Are you aware of any health related studies done on neighboring homes or businesses?

Whitey mentioned that there is material buried in the area where the plant once stood. Do you know what is buried there, and if it might have any health impact on the surrounding area?

MB: The Coldwater Road plant was located north of Flint, Michigan in the Beecher-Mt. Morris area. The area was mixed and many people had wells for drinking water. Behind the plant there were huge settling ponds where plating fluids, die cast waste water and chemicals full of toxic poisonous waste and heavy metal contaminants were pumped. The material certainly leached into the ground. I called for health studies for the area but the state never followed up that I know of. In addition to these chemical lakes of toxic material, the plant emitted tons of toxic material from the furnaces and exhausts stacks in the plant. The prevailing winds carried that material into the homes of everyone in the area.

Again, I know of nothing being done to see if it affected people's lives. The plant is gone now and I understand that the huge chemical settling ponds are covered up. In my view the Coldwater Road site in Michigan's is a Love canal all over again. This toxic material eventually will reappear somewhere and the end result will be more human and environmental harm. General Motors doesn't want to take any responsibility for the mismanagement or clean up of this material, so they will ignore it.

MW: Mike, there are 391,000 GM hourly retirees and surviving spouses relying on health insurance, and when you factor in Ford and Chrysler it rises to over one million. Past UAW leaders negotiated health care benefits to protect retirees and their spouses. The contracts are legally binding and retirees are legally entitled to their health care benefits, which they paid for in lieu of wages. We have all heard the media bash auto retirees by calling them legacy costs. How humane is it to permanently sacrifice struggling auto retirees on a cyclical downturn because southern legislators, who have foreign plants in their states, dislike unions? What are your concerns about the struggling auto retirees and their spouses who are witnessing the evaporation of their critical healthcare benefits, when they need them most for potential health related issues like cancer?

MB: When you think about it, the most important thing a person can have is good health. Everything in your life depends on it. Your family is not a family if you don't have it and you leave them because of a premature death or ailment. A vibrant community is a healthy community. You can't pursue happiness without good health. The United Auto Workers Union fought and sacrificed to get health care for its members and the nation. We diverted pay raises and COLA to pay for our health care. GM didn't give it to us; we earned it and paid for it with our blood, sweat and tears. Now it's a corporate "legacy cost" that makes GM "uncompetitive", and the business model today doesn't want to provide for it. Too many in Washington and

on Wall Street want it buried, like the Coldwater Road toxic chemicals. The cost to the Nation will be great and the price the nation pays in human suffering and well being will be great. Good health is a human right and should be ensured by our government and our Unions.

MW: In conclusion, thank you Mike for participating in this interview. You have spent a lifetime of dedication working for American workers. Your comments and information will speak loudly on this issue going forward and my respect for you runs deep.

Unfortunately, this issue may not be limited to just blue-collar, but white collar workers as well. It also may not be limited to just GM, but could reach out to other automakers with similar manufacturing processes? This industry can ill afford a far reaching massive cancer issue that reaches far back in time, yet given the fact that auto retirees are seeing their critically needed health care benefits put in jeopardy, they are being forced to view the big picture.

Given the horrendous cancer questions that Mike raises, what is needed is an immediate investigation, extensive tests and a comprehensive impact study by applicable governmental agencies. The responsibility of these agencies would be to honestly and openly ascertain if there are health issues, disclose all applicable details of any potential health crisis, what the real meaning of these cancer questions are, its impact on workers and on the people living around the manufacturing plants, what human costs have been already paid and what health consequences can be expected in the future. Special attention should be rendered to not only active factories but to areas where factories have already been shuttered or leveled.

It should be made absolutely impossible for these companies to negotiate away or weaken their health care obligations to retirees.

This issue is too profoundly serious to ignore.

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