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Toxic Time Bomb: The True Legacy Cost of the Auto Industry

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/id127.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

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TOXIC TIME BOMB / THE TRUE LEGACY COST OF THE AUTO INDUSTRY

America's deep recession has exacerbated issues within problematic industries, and there are those looking for a scapegoat. One of the most focused upon industries today is the auto industry. The scapegoats are the defenseless hard pressed auto retirees who have dedicated a lifetime of difficult work putting America on wheels.

Who is really paying the legacy costs of this ill run industry? Are these retirees to blame, or are they the actual victims?

We have all heard the media reports that our domestic auto retirees' healthcare benefits are a primary reason for the downward slide of the domestic auto industry. Could it just be that these stressed retirees have been unfairly labeled as expendable legacy costs? It appears that the retirees' life and death healthcare benefits have been slotted for reduction or extinction by the companies, America's elected government officials and even their own top union leadership.

Working in American auto plants is unlike working for a bank, a grocery store, an office, Communications Company, utility or most other safe industries. The potential for close and continuous exposure in these auto factories to dangerous toxic elements is far different than these other jobs. That is why past UAW leaders over the last fifty years negotiated healthcare benefits for workers and retirees.

The auto industry includes many essential manufacturing and parts factories that supply them. Industrial towns and cities have depended upon these factories for the jobs and the tax base to support local governments and the services they provide. Concurrently, the workers in these factories have trusted their employers, unions and government health and safety agencies to protect them from toxic chemicals, pollution and similar hazards of a lethal work environment. Has this trust been deserved?

Many times serious health issues, which occur from decades of workplace exposure to unhealthy work environments, do not surface until workers are retired. In the 1980's I was the chairman of the UAW caucus in power at the largest GM truck assembly plant in the world. One of our union benefits representatives, who had written language for the national automotive agreements, would say in sarcastic gallows humor that he could tell what department a worker worked in by their death certificate. Each department had its particular set of potential health issues.

Autoworkers have been potentially exposed for long periods of time to a vast chemical-soup mixture of health hazards unique to building automobiles. These include breathing paint vapors and solvents, the production and plating of die cast parts, welding fumes, foundry work, pattern maker carcinogen exposure, asbestos exposure, cutting fluids and many other potentially serious health dangers where identifiable toxic chemicals and/or carcinogens were present. Brake shoes, and clutch plates were regularly made from asbestos. In the automotive factories the heat pipes and water pipes were wrapped in deadly asbestos.

Asbestos fibers can lodge in the lining of the abdominal cavity, heart or lungs. They can cause asbestosis, a dreadful lung scarring, and also increases the risk of many different cancers including lung, colon, esophagus and stomach.

Asbestos related cancers have a long latency period; so many workers may not be diagnosed until decades after exposure and retirement. Before the 1980's, factory exposure to asbestos was especially high, and many of those workers at risk are now retired.

In 2006 the Baltimore Sun reported that a scientist at the Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA) was warned that he would be suspended if he would not remove "asbestos" warnings from a certificate about the use of asbestos in automotive brake linings. In the article, Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), said that the attempt to change the OSHA document is what the auto industry and brake industry is doing to defend itself against lawsuits from people who died from occupational exposure to asbestos.

In his 1993 book, WHO WILL TELL THE PEOPLE published by Simon and Schuster, author William Greider

talks of a worried group of autoworkers from GM's Lordstown division called WATCH (Workers Against Toxic Chemical Hazards).

They were concerned about toxic chemical hazards at their GM factory and became alarmed at how many coworkers in their plant were dying prematurely. They began checking and found that between January 1987 and July 1988 seventy-five of their coworkers had died of cancer, leukemia, kidney disease and heart diseases. Their mission was to warn the UAW, GM and the government of their findings.

Another autoworker cancer alarm was sounded in Detroit in 1979 when autoworkers raised concern about suspected excess cancer among woodworking patternmakers. The Journal of Occupational Medicine backed this up and reported that epidemiological studies have cited an increased risk of colorectal cancer among automobile pattern and model makers.

A tremendous amount of metal is used in the production of automobiles, and another area of serious autoworker health anxiety has been the deadly cutting fluids used in metal manufacturing. They can contain carcinogenic chemicals and have been linked to serious pulmonary illnesses.

A 2005 study done on autoworkers that work with metalworking fluids conducted under the University of Massachusetts by Dr. Ellen Eisen concluded that these workers may have a risk of developing prostate cancer with a latency period of around 25 years. This could put most of them into retirement.

These unique auto industry health issues are far from limited to General Motors or any of our other domestic auto factories. A recent April 14, 2009 article in the Wiltshire Times in the UK reported that former autoworkers have developed the asbestos related "Swindon Disease". The article said that the cancer killer mesothelioma was dubbed the "Swindon Disease" (the name of the town in the UK), because of the sheer number of lives it has claimed in the town over the years. The article said "Asbestos was used for welding on cars until the mid 1960s and used in other parts of the factory, including on steam pipes and in the boiler room."

There have also been very serious concerns expressed about automobile plastic operations and there have been confirmation from other related industries that the resulting vapors and solvents used in plastics are linked to lymphatic leukemia.

The EPA has listed indoor air pollution as one of the top five environmental risks to public health. In January of 2006, the Ecology Center, based in Michigan, released an alarming paper titled "Toxic at Any Speed: Chemicals in Cars and the Need for safe Alternatives" which discussed the dangerous health hazards contained in automobile interiors. Some of the chemicals in these interiors include polybrominated diphenyl ethers and phthalates, which are used to soften the plastics in automobile interiors. The study explained how these chemicals are linked to liver toxicity, impaired learning, birth defects, premature births and many other serious health issues. The Ecology Center said autos are chemical reactors releasing toxins before you even turn the engine on. They urged automakers to stop using these dangerous chemicals.

Most drivers are only in their vehicles for short periods of time compared to the autoworkers on the assembly lines who work around these trim materials 8-10 hours a day, 5-6 days a week, year after year, and they cannot roll their window down to get away. The up close and personal glues, solvents, carpet fumes, headliner fibers and door panel vapors from thousands of ripe new cars going down the assembly line every week, in addition to all the other factory toxicities, are all inhaled into these workers lungs.

Mike Bennett is the retired UAW local president of both Saturn in Springhill, Tennessee and UAW Local 326 in Flint, Michigan, which represented GM's now closed Flint Ternstedt Plant. The Flint GM Ternstedt factory did die-casting. Cancer was the priority worker issue at this plant. Bennett said this General Motors' factory had rates of lung cancer up to three times normal and that the UAW International Union and the corporation both ignored their responsibility to the young widows of the workers who died.

Bennett went on to state that behind the Ternstedt plant were huge settling ponds where plating fluids, die cast waste water and chemicals full of toxic poisonous waste and heavy metal contaminants were pumped. He said that many people in the surrounding area had wells for drinking water.

Bennett said, in addition to these chemical lakes of toxic material, the plant emitted tons of toxic material from the furnaces and exhaust stacks and that the prevailing winds carried that material into the homes of everyone in the area.

He said, General Motors doesn't want to take any responsibility for the mismanagement or clean up of this material, so they will ignore it. It was the workers in this plant that had to work around this dangerous toxic waste.

Auto retirees have spent their working careers exposed to potentially dangerous toxic chemicals and substances.

It has long been a community concern about the toxic waste that these factories emit, but consider for a moment how much more potent these toxic chemicals, solvents and substances have been at ground zero for the retirees who spent decades working with and closely around them. Some of these substances that auto retirees have had to contend with are Trimethylbenzene, which can impair blood coagulation, Glyco Ethers, which are paint solvents and prolonged exposure can cause liver and kidney damage, anemia, tremors and damage to their neurological system, Manganese and Manganese Compounds, which is used in batteries and other industrial products and overexposure can cause emotional disturbances or a disease of the brain called manganism, Formaldehyde, which the EPA classifies as a probable human carcinogen and Zylene, which can cause confusion, dizziness and even death with prolonged exposure. These are just an exemplary few of the dangerous toxic chemicals and substances that auto retirees may have been exposed to.

In 1994 an occupational disease panel posted a paper by Donald C. Cole, titled "Cancer in the Auto Industry". The paper covered GM, Ford and Chrysler. It discussed the consideration of compensation for those autoworkers whose cancers may have been attributable to past exposures in the auto industry. This stark and revealing paper covered male autoworker cancer risk studies relative to plant and occupation. Some of these occupation / cancer entries included; Assembly plants : lymphomas, trachea, lung, stomach, pancreas, Hodgkin's. Ball Bearing production: pancreas, stomach. Die casting & electro-plating: lympho-reticulo sarcomas, stomach. Engine plants: liver, bladder. Engine & Foundry plants:stomach, prostate. Foundry: pancreas, leukemia, lung. Stamping: leukemia, lung, stomach. Maintenance: pancreas. Mechanics/ Repairmen: stomach, bladder, lymphopoietic, lung. Millwright: rectum, lung. Pattern makers: colon, brain, colorectal, stomach. Spray Painters: colon. Tool & Die makers: digestive, lymphopoietic. Welders: lung, pancreas, stomach.

The discussion phase of the paper did a review on the wide variety of mentioned auto plant cancers, which indicated multiple exposures and potentially potent carcinogens. The paper stated that there are a number of occupations and exposures that remain to be explored.

Auto retirees owned and paid for their healthcare benefits by wage diversions while working. They were not a gift. Past union leaders negotiated these benefits because they knew of their tremendous life and death importance. These benefits are part of the collective bargaining agreement between the UAW and the auto companies and therefore legally binding. The government has no constitutional right to steal these benefits from retirees.

The Voluntary Employee Benefits Association programs, (VEBA) are unfair ways for corporations to divest of their retiree healthcare obligations. Retirees have no vote in the process. Since the auto retirees own their healthcare benefits, the top UAW officials went to court to be able to negotiate and weaken them. Top UAW officials and the auto companies then replaced the autoworkers' retiree healthcare benefit program in 2005 with a VEBA, which totally altered and downgraded the defined retiree healthcare benefits program. It also reallocated the supervision of the healthcare benefits to top UAW leaders.

Now UAW retirees are faced with a company which no longer has direct responsibility for their healthcare, a seriously under funded healthcare VEBA administrated by the top union officials who have betrayed their trust, and they are hammered daily by politicians and the national media who unfairly condemn them as expendable legacy costs.

Top UAW officials have refused to vest retiree healthcare benefits over the years when they could have and should have and also turned their backs on keeping up the retirees' pensions with inflation increases. Auto retirees have fallen further and further behind. This will deny auto retirees the ability to pay for their own health care benefits from their meager pensions.

The dual standard and dissimilarity between the top union officials' pensions and common auto retirees' pensions could not be sharper, because the top union officials who agreed to the negotiating of the retirees' VEBA will retire on safeguarded generous pensions paid for by union dues.

The assault against auto retirees, by the very powers that should be protecting them, is a betrayal and a cultural tragedy. It is easy to make an honest case that auto retirees' healthcare benefits are being collectively stolen from them, when they need them the most. It is interesting that many of the duplicitous governmental politicians who have been using their political pulpits to crush the autoworkers' retiree healthcare benefits were the same politicians campaigning for healthcare for all Americans in the elections just a few short months ago. These are the politicians running our nation today.

In conclusion corporate, union and governmental politicians have all covered up the legitimate needs of these retirees and it really is class warfare. None of those clamoring to steal the auto retirees' healthcare were exposed to the toxic hazards that the retirees were exposed to.

In this piece, I have only touched on a few of the many health issues facing autoworkers and retirees. There are many more. This corporate toxic time bomb has the very real possibility of impacting many American communities going forward.

So who is really paying the ultimate legacy cost in the auto industry?

The true legacy costs are not what the auto companies owe for healthcare to their besieged retirees. Labeling retired autoworkers as expendable legacy costs is false, and it is immoral. The true horrific legacy costs are those borne by America's unappreciated auto retirees.

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