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Michael Leslie

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Abstract
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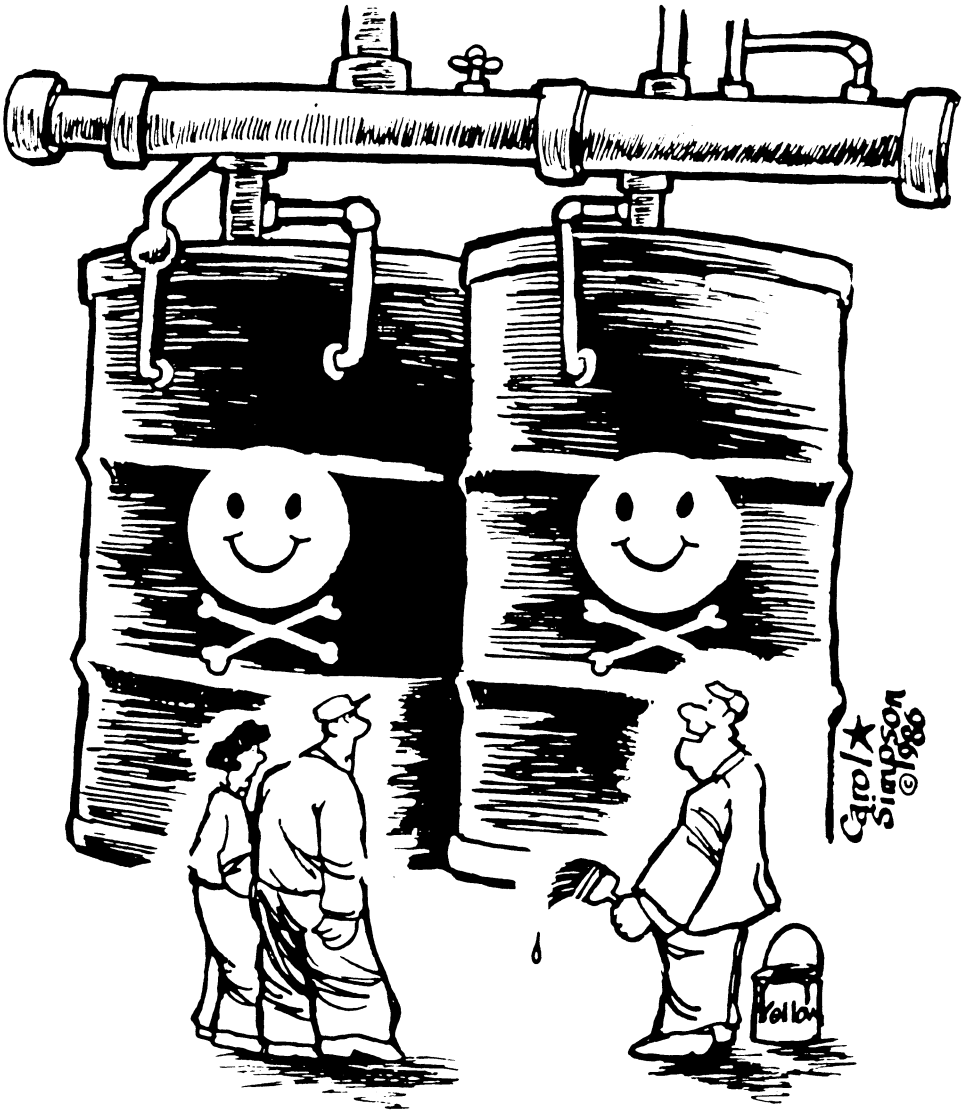
This is the story of how a group of workers represented by UAW Local 735 formed a union Cancer Watch Group (CWG) at GM Hydra-matic to address a problem that the company and outside researchers were not showing sufficient urgency about. It's a story of rank-and-file health-and-safety organizing that relies on the workers themselves to research the links between cancer and the substances they work with.

Keywords
cancer, unsafe working conditions, General Motors, UAW



"After the latest CANCER scare,
we thought you needed a little cheering up."

Stalking a Killer

UAW 735's Cancer Watch

■ *Michael Leslie*

GM Hydra-matic is a dangerous plant. Formerly known as the "Willow Run (Michigan) Bomber Plant" because it produced B-24 bombers during World War II, the plant today builds transmissions for GM vehicles and overseas customers such as Bentley, Jaguar, Rolls Royce and Isuzu. In manufacturing transmissions, the plant uses thousands of coolants, lubricants, degreasers and solvents. Those chemicals, workers suspect, are the causes of GM Hydra-matic's high rate of cancer, particularly brain cancer.

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Noticing a Pattern

May 1987. A woman employed at GM Hydramatic dies of

• *Michael Leslie is First Vice President of United Autoworkers (UAW) Local 735 at General Motor's Hydra-matic plant in Willow Run, Michigan, and has been an active participant in the Cancer Watch Group since its formation.*

astrocytoma, or brain cancer. The following June, another worker who had been hospitalized for months died—again of brain cancer.

Workers noticed a pattern. Too many who'd worked the same jobs had become sick. Too many, advised by company doctors that "it's not work-related," became ill. And too many who'd worked in the same area died. Besides brain cancer, numerous cases of larynx, testical and kidney cancer had been reported.

Some workers took their concerns to UAW Local 735 union reps Marty Thompson and Richard Kahn, who began working with company-run safety awareness groups, challenging management and raising hell.

"At first management wanted people to police each other, checking other workers for safety glasses and safety boots. We stopped that," says Richard. "Workers began to get legitimate health and safety information. For example, at a meeting between union committeemen and the company's industrial hygienist, she explained how a skull-and-crossbones label on a container was there only to scare workers. 'It's harmless,' she said. Later, under pressure from union reps, they replaced the 'harmless' chemical with a safer one."

That pressure would again be applied from the UAW safety rep and union officers on the cancer issue. After several meetings between the UAW, GM medical and safety staff, and the UAW-GM National Joint Committee on Health and Safety, an informal group of union committeepersons, officers and rank-and-filers constituted itself as the semi-official union Cancer Watch Group. CWG eventually wrested from GM a decision to conduct a cancer investigation at Hydra-matic.

The study, being run by Harvard University and the University of Lowell (Massachusetts), is examining the possible links between brain and larynx cancer and chemical substances such as sulfuric Acid Mist, asbestos and solvents.

Workplace cancer studies probe the potential causes of cancer, using death certificates and corporate, state and city records. Deaths due to specific causes are documented. Comparisons are made between deaths of workers and the general population. They're distinguished by sex, race, age and job classification.

Studies, unfortunately, take time. They're slow and often evasive. Numerous studies, using the best epidemiological methods known, provide nothing. And at times working with management and company doctors can bring the same: nothing.

Now You See Us, Now You Don't

Before the cancer investigation, a group of Harvard researchers studied the effects that coolants, solvents and mists have on workers' lungs. Research has shown that workers exposed to machine coolants and mist have higher rates of coughing, phlegm and occupational asthma.

In 1985 Harvard began examining workers at three GM plants—Hydra-matic and two Steer & Gear plants. Workers were given breathing tests, monitored and classified by age, race, smoker or nonsmoker, exposed or unexposed. On test days workers wore air-sample devices, and the samples collected from the three plants were compared to samples from the general population and non-participants. Then, after the testing, sampling and data collecting were completed, the Harvard researchers added a new twist to the study: They disappeared.

From August 1985 to May 1989 no one heard a thing. Even though the Harvard study was partially funded by the membership through UAW-GM National Training funds, union members who were tested received no feedback.

The informal group of union committeepersons, officers and rank-and-filers who eventually became the CWG started making inquiries about the results of the Harvard lung study. Though federal OSHA law "guarantees access" to "any compilation of data or any research, statistical or other study" which the company has prepared from exposure data and medical records, the local could not find out what happened to the study.

Trying to get the results of the Harvard lung study became a central activity of the CWG. Was there something in the lung study that would help determine what was causing so much cancer in the plant? Was there, indeed, evidence of an abnormally high cancer rate?

Getting answers to these questions was frustrating. Though the department level health-and-safety committees (composed of union members appointed by management) were helpful in gathering information and raising concerns, management representatives on the plantwide joint health-and-safety committee blocked any effort by union representatives on the committee to really deal with the issue.

When we eventually got a copy of the results of the study, it was not through official company-union channels. Through informal contacts with an AFL-CIO official, we discovered an article on the study was being published in the *American Journal*

of Industrial Medicine. While the published article confirmed that machining fluids caused "acute airflow obstruction" at levels "well below current recommended exposure limits," it said nothing about cancer.

Though the Harvard lung study didn't provide any information that would help our Cancer Watch, our experience tracking it down provided an object lesson in turning over health research to outside experts with no accountability to the union membership. Later, it was discovered that the Harvard researchers had run up against management/GM medical department interference. Union members due for retesting were transferred, says one source. Air quality tests were thrown off by tampered ventilation.

The plant's health and safety department had begun to take on a ridiculous quality. Rather than deal with the real issues, management set up "good housekeeping" and "safety contests" in one section of the plant. A nice clean department with a minimum of injuries would be rewarded with GM hats, coffee cups and key rings. Instead of tackling noise problems head-on by enclosing machinery, management designed stupid ear plug programs, illustrated by cartoons of ear hairs singing when workers wear ear plugs and getting dizzy and dying when they don't.

Waiting on a study could take forever, and phoney safety programs with singing hairs just didn't cut it. It was time to hold management responsible for health problems at Hydra-matic. It was time for a change.

Cancer Watch Group

In May 1989 the Cancer Watch Group distributed 5,000 flyers at the plant gate. The issue: a meeting concerning brain cancer deaths at Hydra-matic. At that meeting workers compiled the names of co-workers who've died and their former jobs. In attendance were union reps, active and laid-off workers, surviving spouses and many cancer victims. Volunteer forms were printed and distributed plantwide. Later, another flyer was passed out on all shifts asking workers to compile a list of members who are victims of cancer.

The initial response was frightening. One grinding department turned in a list of 18 names of workers who had died of cancer over the last 15 years. Every week, a new name would be turned into the local. As time passed, CWG volunteers began their own cancer study, listing names by department, social security number, age, race, sex, seniority, active/retired/laid-off, and surviving or dead. Through this process, we learned of 30 deaths due to brain

cancer in the plant, which is well above what would be expected in a normal population of our size.

Conferring with officers from UAW locals at GM plants in Lordstown, Ohio, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the CWG modeled its cancer study on similar rank-and-file union efforts at those plants.

As our Cancer Watch was developing its information, the union initiated a series of grievances, phone calls, letters and meetings that finally resulted in company recognition of the problem and the decision to commission a new expert study. This time Harvard and the University of Lowell are examining brain and larynx cancer, and they're communicating with Local 735. CWG volunteers have asked to be involved in the study so as to avoid a second disappearing act. CWG has also acquired the study's proposal, schedule and procedures, and it is actively monitoring the study's progress and keeping the membership informed and involved.

Unions, like most large organizations, have immense communications problems. Local 735 is no different. Members at Hydramatic (over 9,000 active, laid-off and retired) had heard about all these studies, but few beyond the CWG volunteers had seen them. The local union paper and CWG flyers and meetings had informed many, but many were still uninformed. The CWG decided to bulk mail the 1985 Harvard lung study, the proposal for the brain and larynx cancer study, and a shorter less technical report on both to the local's entire 9,000 members.

The union's executive board financed a raffle, with proceeds going toward postage costs. The board also provided paper, office space, phones, printing equipment and clerical support. Post cards were mailed to all officers, committees and union reps requesting their help. Volunteers collated, stapled, stuffed and sealed thousands and thousands of envelopes. Some took work home. Others drafted children, grandchildren and neighbors to help.

Besides providing more detailed information, our bulk mailing helped keep people agitated about the issue and attracted new volunteers and new leads on cancer victims in the plant.

The CWG is a small group of workers fighting for a cleaner workplace. At an auto plant with 6,800 active members, we'll get from 5 to 40 people at a meeting, but many more give us leads and stay informed of what's going on. Retirees and family members work with active members. We've involved workers waiting in the Job Bank, workers disabled with carpal tunnel syndrome, and many members who are otherwise not actively involved in the union.

While workplace cancer is our focus, workers bring other problems like carpal, workers compensation, fumes and mists, head-

aches and breathing difficulties to the CWG. We've brought in speakers on workers comp, refusing unsafe work, right-to-know and corporate crime. We've generated OSHA training for union reps, shown health-and-safety films like one on "hard metals disease," and provided general information on a range of workplace health and safety issues.

"It was because of my husband's death that I'm doing this," says Bonnie McBee, an activist with the CWG. "I've got friends and relatives in the plant. I'm doing this to just save one more life and get that plant cleaned up."

What Cancer Watch wants is simply that: a clean, healthy place to work. Nothing less. CWG wants workers to know what they're being exposed to and how to fight the company when it won't do its job to obtain substitute chemicals, improved ventilation, and accurate exposure records.

We want studies that zero in on real problems. Minority and women workers, for example, are often relegated to lower-paying and more dangerous jobs. Skilled trades workers are exposed to chemicals, electrical fields and substances that other workers are not. These groups face specific cancer, reproductive and general health problems that require specific solutions.

The workers themselves know or suspect the problems, and they should be part of providing the solutions. Company safety departments, studies by university experts, and joint union-management health-and-safety programs are valuable and useful, but only if the local union is aggressive in pursuing its own health and safety agenda. When in-plant programs move too slowly or seem to evade the real issues, then the union should help by giving them a little push in the right direction. ■