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PCB controversy spawns large cast of principal characters

By CANDACE DOLLAR

While a Columbia law professor ponders weeks of evidence presented by officials from the Department of Environmental Conservation, the General Electric Company, and independent scientists and chemists, GE union officials and plant employes are gathering forces behind state representatives in a last-minute effort to save their livelihoods.

Ironically, they are lining up behind the very forces on which they blame the controversy over the toxic chemical PCB. In fact, all 1,800 employes of the G.E. plants in Hudson Falls and Fort Edward signed a petition blaming "overly ambitious politicians" and calling on Gov. Hugh L. Carey and state representatives to save their jobs.

The "overly ambitious politicians" tag refers to EnCon Commissioner Ogden Reid, who reportedly is planning to issue an order banning any PCB discharges at the two plants by September, 1976, an order GE says could close the plants. Reid initiated the controversy last summer, issuing a warning against human consumption of fish taken from the Hudson River because of high levels of PCB in them. The image lately of Reid as a champion of the environment in the PCB drama, however, has changed to Reid as the heavy, the "ambitious politician the man who will put 1,800 workers out of their jobs.

But Reid is not the only character in the drama who has changed images over the past months. And he is not the only politician who has jumped on the PCB bandwagon. Assemblyman Gerald Solomon, (R, 108th dist.) called a press conference at GE Thursday and said he would try to arrange a meeting between Carey and union representatives. Solomon said Carey is "the only person that can stop him (Reid). A decision is going to be made in two weeks, and if we are going to act, we have to act now."

News Analysis

GE employes intend to show Carey just how they feel. Employe Russ Potter told Solomon he was arranging for seven busloads of workers to travel to Albany if the meeting is arranged.

Potter also said at the press conference that "PCB is just like anything else. Some people are allergic to hand lotion, some people are allergic to hair tonic. I have been working here for 25 years and I'm not allergic to PCB". But at hearings in Albany during November and December, GE disclosed that about 50 workers at the plants came down with skin ailments traced to the industrial chemical. Sixteen others came down with various other ailments, such as nausea and nasal irritations which may have been caused by PCB, according to GE.

Those same hearings found a pathologist from the University of Wisconsin Medical School testifying monkeys fed PCB developed acne, had their eye lashes, and suffered swelling of the eyelids. The pathologist said the monkeys were given amounts of PCB far lower than what was found in some Hudson River fish.

The union's position on the controversy, as expressed by business agent Bernard Leonka, is "we feel we can have both jobs and health conditions at the plants." In December, he said, the union had taken a position that employes and the public should be protected from the chemical, but that state environmental standards should not be so strict as to force the company to close its plants.

Leonka also said at that time that the company had not implemented many precautionary measures for employes in contact with the chemical until the controversy began.

Company officials apparently are still taking the same position they took in September. An order from Reid for a zero discharge by September could close the plants. An order from Reid would unfairly burden the company, forced to compete against manufacturers in other states where the PCB chemical is still used.

Local GE officials said Thursday, during a tour of the Fort Edward plant, that researchers are close to finding a substitute for PCB. They reasoned that even if a substitute is not found, the company could live with and EPA proposed zero discharge by June 30, 1977. In that case, all PCB users would be in the same boat.

GE officials also said during the tour that the company has been using another chemical, which does not have the nonflammable characteristics of PCB, for manufacture of capacitors sold to the IBM company. IBM Manufactures Computers for sale world-wide and "some" countries, including Japan, have banned PCB for environmental reasons.

Readers should dispell however any notions of huge, boiling chemical vats behind the doors of General Electric. Workers are only exposed to very small amounts of the chemical on the surface of the capacitors after they are produced.

Leonka's description of PCB as a coral snake, "beautiful but potent" was perhaps the best comment. The coral snake has bitten in many directions



OPPOSE THREATENED GE SHUT-DOWN—A group of persons gathered Thursday at a press conference to oppose the possible closing of the Hudson Falls and Fort Edward GE plants because of their apparent inability to meet the state's order to eliminate all PCB discharges. Sitting at the table are, from left, Leon Layden, Kingsbury town supervisor; Dorothy Dunphy, GE employes' union president; Bernard Leonka, union business agent; U.S. Rep. Gerald Solomon and Russ Potter president of the GE employes' association. (Photo by Teddi Sherwood)