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Union Seeks More Protection From UE On Toxic Chemicals

By Harry Wilensky
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A union representing Union Electric Co. workers says it wants more protection for those who handle toxic chemicals — including PCBs — as recommended in a federal study in 1977.

The unpublicized federal study was undertaken after some UE employees who work exposed to toxic chemicals complained of skin irritation, dizziness and nervousness.

The study found that the hazard level to which those workers were being exposed was well below the federal standard. The study was merely safety recommendations.

But because so little is known about long-term effects of exposure, the study recommended additional safeguards, some of which Union Electric has provided. However, the utility has rejected others as unnecessary.

One of the recommendations that was rejected called for annual physical tests for workers exposed to toxic chemicals.

The study has never been made public. The Post-Dispatch learned of it while looking into a PCB spill in Bellwn two weeks ago.

The union is Local 1439 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. The federal study it requested was made by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Union spokesmen say they are preparing to ask the company to reconsider its rejection of annual physicals.

The principal toxic chemicals causing concern among workers are PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), which are used as coolants in transformers and condensers, and trichlorophenoxyacetic acid, which is used in spraying operations.

Of Union Electric's 5,400 employees, approximately 270 are involved with PCBs and 100 with herbicide spraying.

Exposure to oils containing PCBs occurs infrequently during maintenance of transformers and more frequently during yearly inspections. Linemen also have potential exposure when replacing a leaking condenser known as a capacitor.

Although the federal study found little evidence of danger to employees, it reported:

"Significant amounts of measurable contamination of PCBs were found on various tools and equipment and on the hands and faces of employees, in view of the inadequacy of existing knowledge of the potential toxicity of low-level exposures to PCBs, a judgment as to whether employees were being exposed to levels which may be potentially hazardous cannot be made at this time ....

"Since there is so little information available regarding the long-term effects of low-level exposure over a working lifetime and since PCBs may be retained in the body for years, it is advisable to reduce air concentrations to the lowest detectable levels by means of engineering controls."

The report recommended pre-employment and yearly physicals for all workers exposed to PCBs and pesticides. A spokesman for Union Electric said the recommendation was rejected because the company's physicians considered such examinations unnecessary.

Another recommendation was that the area used for overhauling transformers containing PCBs and the area used by linemen for testing oil should be strictly set apart from other areas. Union Electric since has built a separate building for these operations.

One recommendation called for an

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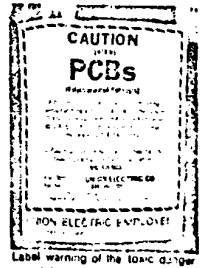

Label warning of the toxic danger posed by a drumful of chemicals used in electric capacitors.

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improved education program on toxicity hazards. The company said it has conducted such educational meetings.

Potentially exposed women in the work force who are of child-bearing age should be advised of the adverse effects of the chemicals on the unborn child, the report continued. It said those who bear children while working with PCBs should be counseled on the adverse effects of nursing the child.

The company said it has no women working with the toxic chemicals, so it considered this recommendation irrelevant.

Earl Schubert, a union busines agent, said the IBEW plans to meet with management soon to negotiate a "safe work practice" program based on the recommendations in the federal study.

One of the major objectives will be the annual physicals, he said. He said the union was disappointed in management's initial rejection of this recommendation.

Another union objective will be improving the education program suggested by the federal experts. Workers need to be made fully aware of toxic hazards and first-aid procedures, Schubert said.

"Just what to do in handling a PCB spill should be spelled out clearly, in detail," he said. "Right now, each repair crew sort of chooses its own way of handling a cleanup."

One UE worker who asked not to be identified said he was worried about himself and his family "getting contaminated" because he had been working on cleanups of PCB spills before toxic hazards were recognized.

In past years, he said, "When some of the stuff got on your clothes, you were told just to wash your hands and get your clothes washed. But for the last two years, the men have been wearing jump suits, gloves, masks — stuff that is destroyed after each job."

PCBs are fireproof as well as a good conductor and insulator. But being chemically inert, they are so stable that they persist indefinitely.

PCBs for 50 years have been used all over the world in capacitors on power lines. Only in recent years has the toxic hazard been recognized.

Union Electric gradually is phasing out its 35,000 PCB capacitors and has placed in operation 500 of a new type containing no toxic elements. But it intends to use up its remaining supply of PCB capacitors.

A capacitor consists of layers of foil immersed in a stainless steel container. Lightning striking a power line can rupture the seams of this container and spill two gallons of PCBs on the ground.

Such a spill occurred Aug. 8 on a pole at the northwestern corner of Manchester and Kehrs Mill roads in Ballwin. To clean up the spill, UE linemen removed about 100 feet of soil that might have been contaminated.

A sawdust-like substance was spread over the pavement to absorb the oily spill. All the contaminated material — dirt, oil, rags — was placed in two steel drums for shipment to a waste disposal center in Alabama.

All six of the capacitors on this pole were replaced with new units containing no PCBs.

Workers handling such cleanups carry an emergency kit. If they consider a PCB spill dangerous, they can put on disposable clothing that resembles a rain suit and includes plastic bootees.

The authors of the federal study noted that studies of occupational exposure to PCBs have been made in Japan, Sweden and Australia and said: "PCBs have not clearly been demonstrated to result in adverse human health effects with the possible exception of chloracne."

The federal study reported that UE workers using kerosene in spraying operations formerly complained of headaches, nausea, skin rash and eye irritation. These symptoms showed up when linemen were spraying without protective clothing or respirators with goggles.

"However, no employee has had any of the above symptoms since the company provided protective clothing and respirators a few years ago," the report said. "The only employee complaint since the company furnished protective clothing is that while wearing rubberized rainwear or impervious outerwear, they get hot and sweaty in the summertime."

Schubert agreed with this observation, reporting that the only complaints from workers lately involved the discomfort of very hot work in the protective clothing.

A spokesman for Union Electric said: "Our workmen for many years have been handling PCBs just like oil, and there has never been any adverse reaction other than skin rash."

He said the chief concern about PCBs is not any potential effect on workers handling them but the danger of the toxic materials getting into waterways, contaminating fish and thus getting into the food chain.

Last year, a firm collecting PCB-contaminated waste from 1,800 St. Louis-area service stations and trucking companies was charged with dumping the material in a makeshift disposal site near a tributary of the Meramec River in Jefferson County.

Some of the waste seeped into the stream and killed fish, it was reported.