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SURVIVAL KIT

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Vinyl Chloride- Threat To Workers

This issue of Survival Kit focuses on vinyl chloride. Inside are a fact sheet, an explanation of how the OSHA standard will be set, and an editorial, in addition to other stories on how workers took action to improve their lives on the job.



Photo by Dorothea Lange

The recent discovery that exposure to vinyl chloride can cause cancer is creating an occupational health emergency in America. OSHA has proposed an exposure limit of 50 parts per million. Unionists and medical experts think this is dangerously high. The current limit of 500 ppm will prevail for about a year.

Vinyl chloride produces a fatal cancer of the liver - angiosarcoma, other liver diseases, and perhaps other forms of cancer. In a recent study, 11 of 60 rats exposed to 250 ppm of vinyl chloride got cancer.

At least six workers of the B.F. Goodrich plant in Louisville, Kentucky contracted this rare form of liver cancer. Five of them are dead. Goodrich announced that

the men had worked with vinyl chloride gas in the manufacture of plastics and had died between 1968 and December, 1973.

In addition, 23 out of the 271 workers at the Goodrich plant are suffering from cirrhosis of the liver. Similar numbers of afflicted workers were discovered at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber plant in Niagara Falls, N.Y. and the Union Carbide plant in South Charleston, West Virginia.

Dr. Irving Selikoff of Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York warned that liver diseases come about from prolonged exposure to chemicals. "The plastic era is now about 35 years old," he said. Selikoff predicted that "many people who had worked with vinyl chloride would soon be showing symptoms." Many diseases caused by industrial materials take 10 - 25 years to show up.

Four factories in Massachusetts manufacture polyvinyl chloride. They are:

Borden Chemical, Leominster
Gr at American, Fitchburg
Olin Chemical, Fall River
Monsanto, Indian Orchard

A CLOSER LOOK AT PLASTIC

Vinyl chloride is the foundation of much of the modern plastics industry. When large numbers of its molecules are put together they become polyvinyl chloride, a white powdery chemical which looks like sugar.

continued on p. 7

black women lead walk ut

Workers at Birmingham Stove and Range, a cast iron foundry in Birmingham, Alabama, have been on strike since December rather than accept the inadequate contract they had been offered. The strike has been 100% effective in stopping production even though Alabama's anti-union "right to work" law has left the workers only half unionized.

Virtually the entire plant—except the foreman and supervisors—is black. A majority of Stove and Range workers, about 60%, are women who perform the heavy industrial work usually restricted to men including handling hot molten iron.



"YOU COULD GET KILLED!"

After wages and benefits, the workers' main concern is health and safety. "If you refuse to do what they tell you to do, that's grounds for firing," said one woman. "I'm not going to run that machine so that a skillet is going to fly off and smash my head open. You could get killed."

"They take their time sending you to a doctor, too. Alcohol for everything; alcohol and liniment. The handle on my machine fell off and hit me on the hand and it took them two weeks—and I had to go the office every day complaining—before they sent me to the doctor."

The strikers have requested support from the community and the company has been unable to recruit scabs. The workers are determined. As one woman put it, "It's just that, all the people working here, after all these years, don't want anybody else to have to come in these gates and have to keep on fighting the same structure over and over again."

from The Southern Patriot

EDITORIAL

OSHA's slow motion on the vinyl chloride emergency is typical of the Government's tendency to respond to problems with too little, too late. The dangers of vinyl chloride have been suspected for many years. It took the death of six workers and the expected illness of many more to bring any action.

OSHA will not usually issue a strong standard for the use of a substance until its consequences reach epidemic proportions. In cases of carcinogens (cancer-causing chemicals) like vinyl chloride and asbestos, whose effects are not felt for many years after the first exposures, this "wait and see" attitude costs many lives.

OSHA enforcement procedures suffer from similar defects. OSHA lacks the personnel and the will to clean up work places adequately. Inspections focus on safety hazards and overlook more subtle health factors. Fines average about \$25 per violation, only 2.5% of the ceiling set by the law.

OSHA, like other governmental agencies, considers itself an impartial arbiter between management and labor. But in a conflict between profits and lives there can be no middle ground. Until OSHA goes all out to fight for workers' health—no matter how much it costs—its hands will be as bloody as the bosses'.

Despite this, the 1970 Safety and Health law does give workers some tools for action. For the first time there is a set of national standards with the force of law. Health and safety has been legitimized as a bargaining issue. And management is sufficiently scared and outraged at this intrusion upon their "property rights" that workers can use the threat of calling in OSHA as an effective weapon.

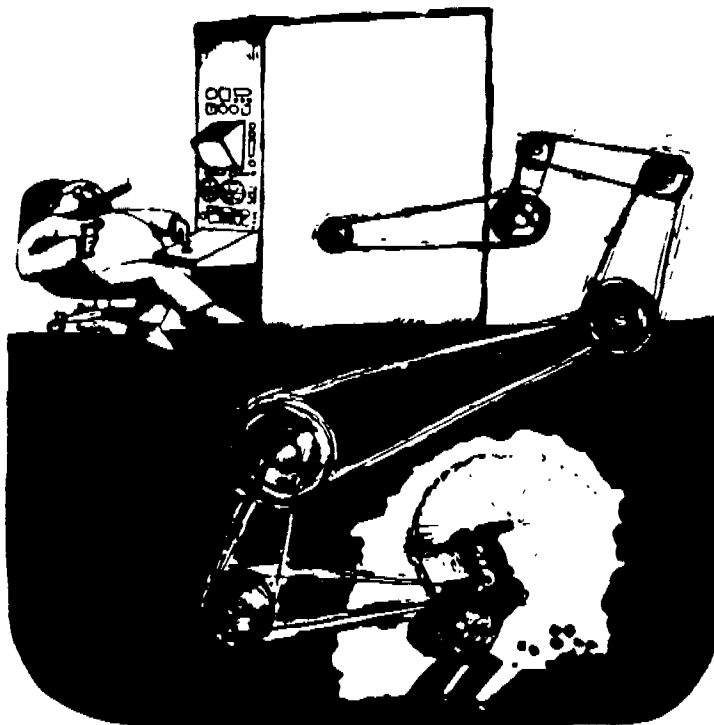
But better working conditions will not come without action on the shop floor and at the bargaining table. From the rank and file to international officers, workers need to be aware of threats to their health and be ready to do whatever is necessary to get rid of them.

MINERS' STRUGGLE INTENSIFIES

The Brookside miners' strike in Harlan County, Kentucky against Duke Power Company is now in its eighth month. Last June 180 miners, concerned over unsafe conditions and low pay, voted to join the United Mineworkers union; but Duke has consistently refused to negotiate. There have been mass arrests of workers and their families, and the union charges that there have been shootings and attempted dynamiting of people on the picket line. Recently the water supply to the strikers' homes was shut off, causing a major health hazard.

A citizens' inquiry committee of lawyers and scholars visited Harlan County in mid-March to talk to the strikers in a two-day open hearing. The members of the committee concluded that the strike is a "classic contest between people trying to better their lives, local coal bosses, and an absentee landlord (Duke Power)." They urged Carl Horn, president of Duke Power, to settle with the strikers. A settlement would mark the first successful union drive in eastern Kentucky in decades.

Arnold Miller, president of the Mineworkers union, charges that huge power companies like Duke "come into Appalachia looking for coal and fast profits, but all they've ever left behind are crippled miners dying of black lung, slag heaps, and abandoned mines. We



are going to enforce safety to the letter with no ifs, ands, or buts. And if that is not acceptable to some coal operators, then they had better find a new way of making a living."

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Chicana Workers Win Farah Strike

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America have won their 22 month strike against Farah Manufacturing Company. On February 24, Willie Farah agreed to rehire all 3,000 strikers and to recognize the union as the bargaining agent for the production workers. He will immediately begin paying the strikers \$30 a week for up to ten weeks, until they have all been rehired. This settlement is a major victory for the predominantly Chicano (Mexican-American) women who work in the plants.

One month before the settlement, the National Labor Relations Board ruled against Farah's "high-level strategy of massive and lawless resistance to union organizing."

But it was the determination of the strikers and the growing nation-wide boycott of

Farah products that brought the company to its knees. The Farah Pants Boycott, supported by the AFL-CIO and local Farah Strike Support Committees in over thirty cities, caused the company to lose over \$14 million in 1972.

Unionization of Farah is a victory for workers all across the United States. The Southwest has become a low-wage haven for companies that want to run away from the better organized workforce in the North. There are over 100,000 clothing workers in the Southwest and, until now, management intimidation has kept them almost entirely unorganized. Although the Farah workers' fight for better conditions is not over, their victory will help other workers to dare to struggle and organize.