

John Herling

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Protecting Workers— And Their Jobs

Like God's angry man, Peter Bommarito, president of the Rubber Workers Union, stormed at leaders in the chemical and plastics industries for resisting stronger safeguards against cancer-producing vinyl chloride, a substance used in the manufacture of a wide variety of products.

"There are millions of workers—frightened men and women—who don't want to die for their jobs," said Bommarito, who is chairman of the occupational safety and health committee of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department which represents 6,000,000 workers in 60 unions. "They want to be told that industry management and union and the government, federal and state, can assure them of a job and their lives. They certainly want both," he continued. "But if this is not possible then they choose life."

Bommarito spoke to an occupational safety conference on vinyl chloride. The hushed audience in the Labor Department auditorium included representatives of management, government and unions. He made it clear he had no intention of bargaining with the health and safety of union men and women—although this has sometimes happened in the past.

Often, when stricter standards are advanced for the protection of the health and safety of workers in plants and/or mines, two things take place. First, the prospect of greater protection for workers scares the industry because of the expenses of implementing safety standards. Second, management warns that the cost of such improvements will be so prohibitive that plants will be closed and workers thrown out of their jobs.

What it comes down to is that workers are confronted with a dread choice: "Your wages or your life."

Based on experience, employers are confident that unions and their leaders, threatened with unemployment, will make some face-saving compromises. These are often filtered through a screen of confusing statistics, to reassure workers that at least for the time being they have no medical cause for alarm.

But Bommarito was having none of that. Like the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, his union has been one of the pioneers in insisting that management must not duck responsibility maintaining safe work places. Bommarito says he has had a bellyful of

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management's tactics of delay and poor-mouthing of its financial ability to cover the costs of protection.

What it amounts to, he said, is that the "nation is being blackmailed" by managements resisting the application of new effective health standards. They raise the specter of "an end to 1.6 million jobs and national disaster."

Bommarito's voice grew sharper:

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"This country survived for nearly 200 years without polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and we can survive in the future without it. If PVC cannot be made or used safely, then the proposed standard must be replaced by an orderly procedure to phase out vinyl chloride production and find substitutes for its products, or to phase out the products themselves. This is not an easy position to take. But there is no alternative."

The battle over vinyl chloride is the latest confrontation between labor and industry on the subject of protection for workers against cancer-producing chemicals. Battles over asbestos and carcinogens continue to be fought in Congress and in the courts. Labor, said Bommarito, has listened to experts from all over the world and "we have concluded that the proposed government standard of 'no detectable level' for vinyl chloride is both necessary and feasible."

Bommarito concluded: "The issue before us is really not the control of vinyl chloride. The issue is whether life has a higher value than dollars, whether we will permit corporate structures to run the country without control. The language and the intent of the Occupational and Safety and Health Act mean that workers' lives no longer can be sacrificed for financial gain. The vital organs of our bodies are not for sale."

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