

Lead Workers Say Results Of Health Tests Are Secret

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St. Joe Minerals Corporation's lead smelter in Herculaneum gives employees little or no training on health hazards of lead exposure and refuses to disclose medical information about employees who have lead poisoning, says Carl Givens business agent for Teamsters Local 688, which represents the employees.

Givens testified yesterday in the second day of a hearing at the Bel Air Hilton Hotel on new lead exposure standards proposed by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). St. Joe Minerals Co. did not send a representative to the hearing.

Givens was accompanied by seven St. Joe workers. All have had high levels of lead in their blood at different times. The company routinely tests employees' blood for lead content, but refuses to tell employees their precise blood-lead level on the ground that it is "privileged information," Givens said. The company tells the employee only that his level is high or that it is not.

High exposure to lead fumes and dust can cause chronic nausea, twitches, anemia, abdominal cramps, joint aches, kidney problems, dizziness and even brain disease.

Arnett Burris, who has worked for St. Joe for 38 years, has only 20 per cent use of his kidneys. In addition, he has muscle cramps and high blood pressure. He has been to several doctors, but none have told him the cause of his problems.

"They take the test and ask 'Where do you work?' I tell them and then they say, 'I won't be involved in any lawsuit. I'll get in touch with your company doctor.'" Burris said.

Several of the employees said the company safety officer had given them pills to take for high blood-lead levels without an examination by the company doctor. Others have been hospitalized by the company, but not told the details of why.

A year ago the company began a small training program on health hazards for new employees, the workers said. And it was not until three weeks ago that the company began training employees in the proper use of respirators, they added.

But the company will never reduce the lead exposure to health levels without being forced to by OSHA, Givens contended.

"St. Joe management informed us there was no way they could be in compliance with the proposed new OSHA standards," Givens said. "We're not interested in closing the place down because it's our jobs. But we are interested in cleaning up the environment. We are interested in knowing what the lead is doing to us."

The proposed standard would reduce the amount of allowable lead in a plant's air to 100 micrograms for each cubic meter of air, based on an eight-hour time-weighted average. The present standard is 200 micrograms, the highest allowable level in any industrial nation.

Although OSHA has no standard for the level of lead allowed in workers' blood, the agency is considering setting one at 60 micrograms for each 100 grams of blood.

Knowlton J. Caplan, an engineer who works as a consultant for many lead-related industries, testified that the technology did not exist to build a lead smelter that would meet the 100 micrograms air standard in all places. In battery plants, he said, it would be technically possible to comply, but many small companies could not afford to do so.

One such small company is Bell City Battery Manufacturing Co., of Belleville. Mrs. Jeanith L. Miller, whose family owns the firm, testified that adoption of the stricter standards would drive her out of business. Her son, Ardell, who works in the plant, said the plant was cleaner than some restaurants and homes.

"We propose that all companies be judged on their own merits," Miller said. "If I work there — and I do — I want it to be safe enough for anyone to work there."

Even if OSHA set a lead standard for blood, there will be problems with getting reliable test readings, said Fred J. Grigsby Jr., manager of personnel relations of KW Battery Division of Skokie, Ill., a suburb of Chicago.

His company, a subsidiary of Westinghouse Electric Corp., recently ran experiments that showed that blood-lead level readings can vary considerably between laboratories. The company drew several blood samples from workers and sent the samples to five laboratories.

The readings varied by as much as 55 per cent between labs, he said. The readings even varied in each lab on blood samples taken at the same time from the same man, Grigsby said.

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"I knew there are labs that have very accurate blood-lead results, but they're probably few and far apart. There should be some controls," he said, to ensure that all laboratories provide reliable test results.

OSHA On Lead

Hearings in St. Louis have brought home the personal consequences of working with lead: chronic dizziness, brain damage, gout—all the result of working in an industry where lead poisoning has been the price of employment. The hearings were sponsored by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which has proposed a reduced federal limit on permissible exposure to lead. That lower standards are badly needed, to protect the 1,600,000 workers in the lead processing industry, should be beyond dispute. The issue raised both in the St. Louis hearings and elsewhere is whether the OSHA proposal goes far enough.

The proposed standard would reduce by half the amount of lead currently permitted in a plant's air, and it would require employers to shift workers with high blood-lead levels to other jobs. As labor spokesmen noted at the hearings, however, the wages of employees transferred because of excessive exposure would not be guaranteed. If workers are not to be forced to choose between sacrificing pay and sacrificing health, some such guarantee is clearly necessary.

A second, even broader, issue raised at the hearings was that of sexual discrimination. Because unborn children are particularly susceptible to lead poisoning, OSHA is consid-

ering the establishment of a separate, more stringent, standard for women of child-bearing age. This would amount in practice to a virtual exclusion of women from opportunities of employment in the lead industry. The only defensible standard is one that makes working with lead safe for both men and women.

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