

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

DYING FOR WORK

by Tess Derbyfield

Laundry workers at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston, England, were not required by law to be monitored regularly for radioactivity. That is, not until last August, when three women who worked in the laundry showed plutonium contamination of the lungs.

Dangers to the health of working women are only beginning to be documented. The **Women and Hazards** group (9, Poland St., London W.1.) suggests that the reason it took so long to recognize asbestos as a killer was because it was women in the textile mills who worked with it and statistics on working women were not collected.

JOB GHETTOS

Though approaching 50% of the workforce, most women still work in largely unorganized female job ghettos.

Traditionally, men have held the more obviously dangerous jobs, such as in the mining and construction industries. However, in factories, offices, restaurants, and retail shops, as agricultural, domestic and hospital workers, women risk disease and injury from exposure to noise, dust, fumes, heat, stress, vibration, radiation, and poisonous chemicals. For example, no-one suspected that the typists' indispensable correcting fluid could be responsible for headaches, nausea, and fatigue until its major ingredient, trichloroethylene, turned out to be toxic in studies of other chemical solvents.

Further hidden from view are women who work at home doing housework and taking care of children. In addition to the inevitable back problems and exposure to toxic cleaning chemicals, women washing men's contaminated overalls have been known to contract asbestos and beryllium poisoning. For women who work a double day, there is double the stress and exhaustion.

SPECIAL DANGERS

Women's reproductive capacity makes us especially vulnerable in the workplace. To the list of 30,000 chemicals in commercial production a thousand are added every year. Only a few hundred have been tested adequately for safety to life, and far fewer for the dangers they present to a fetus or to a woman's fertility. Research in Eastern Europe has shown that pregnant women working in the plastics industry and exposed to formaldehyde are at risk. In Italy, a state commission found that a scandalous 20% of pottery workers had aborted or prematurely given birth. Many birth defects are very probably related to exposure to chemicals, (experts say).

Women have long been active in the fight for a healthy workplace. In 1888, the Matchgirls' Strike in London drew attention to the plight of



Women workers in a fish processing plant

women (working with white phosphorous) who contracted necrosis, a terrible bone disease.

Today many feminists have taken up the struggle which brings us up against many of our traditional enemies. Sexist union leadership which neither recognizes nor represents women's health concerns has spurred independent actions such as the production of information pamphlets about job hazards. The belief that any job is better than none, even if it is dangerous, is prevalent in these times of unemployment. Insecurity fosters competitiveness and women have found that a strong presence on health and safety committees helps build trust in organizing around common experiences.

BOSSES OBSTRUCT

The biggest obstacle, of course, is the employer who will stop at nothing to protect profits. A worker in the occupational health movement explains "it's always cheaper to hire a new worker to replace one who's sick than it is to clean up the workplace so anyone can work safely there."

So-called "protective" legislation in the USA and England is reinforcing a sinister development in industry's response to a growing women's consciousness around workplace safety.

Women are being forced out of jobs, particularly in the petro-chemical, heavy metal manufacturing and laboratory areas where dangers to pregnancy or fertility are known to exist. It began a few years ago at a General Motors lead battery plant in Oshawa, Canada, when women working with lead were given the choice of sterilization or the loss of their jobs. Dow, Esso, and Dupont followed suit in what is clearly an assault on women in "non-female" jobs. No similar "concern"

has been expressed for women hospital workers who are exposed daily to countless chemicals, drugs and diseases since that industry depends on a predominantly female workforce.

Nine women automotive workers in Michigan are suing General Motors and

Ford over discrimination against pregnant women who must maintain heavy workloads or be declared medically unfit to work. The women argue that pregnancy should be awarded the same benefits (time off) and workload consideration as other temporary disabilities.

Other workplace strategies include training in spotting hazards and learning to use and develop resources for testing noise and stress levels, chemical contamination and so on.

Consciousness-raising is an integral part of the process as women are beginning to bring a commitment to the

improvement of the quality of life into our challenge of the profit-hungry marketplace.

(See: **Spare Rib**, January '79, "Occupational Hazards to Women," by Anne George, Box 1541, Station B, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5R5. "Womens Work, Womens Health:" by Jean Stellman.)

Women Workers of the Asian Rim

They praise you over scotch and sodas
in finest bars of best hotels
in Manila, Bangkok, Taipei and Seoul.

Men in linen suits toast you:
You so docile and dextrous!
Surely the Economic Miracle is
the best thing for you.
You are being developed.

You, floating currency,
drowning in the economic miracle,
surplus commodity.

We consume your best years,
when our shoes have worn out
you are crumpled and weary
taught to drink coke, seek glamour.

Thirteen others share your dorm room:
formica platform bunks,
treasures in cardboard boxes.
At dawn go stand in the factory,
boss pushes ever harder.

Come home at night
ready to be washed,
wrung out for tomorrow,
money for some noodles,
time for some washing.

Yankee firms seek labor cheap
You are
cheap.

If you protest, you are communist
go to jail
If your price rises, firms run
for cheaper havens
Men in their linen suits
rule you from far away.

You Maria, in the Bataan Export Processing Zone,
you put hair in the heads of Barbie dolls,
get searched by police.
No longer lush home for farmers and fishers,
now safe for foreign investment
You are a piece of cheap labor
Take home \$1.30 a day.

You miss your parents, your farm,
the rice, tomatoes, squash,
you are too busy
to remember you're sweet sixteen,
earning \$1.30 a day.

You Lin, in Taiwan electronic factory
wire the future circuits,
bombs and memory, navigation and control
You make the information revolution
as you grow nearsighted.

You squint through imported microscopes,
use tiny tweezers,
wire wafers of surveillance,
use Dow cleanser, in English
it reads, "vapors may be fatal."

You Lucia, Korean textile worker,
you breathe cotton fibers, get sick,
faint from heat, go to bed hungry,
begin to organize.

Stronger and stronger grows your union,
stronger yet the attack,
dragged by the hair,
smeared with buckets of shit,
beaten and clubbed,
you keep singing your union song,
tell the world
you too are human beings.

You are fired,
government union sends a letter
to all factories:
"don't give them jobs,
they make trouble."
You keep telling your story,
you are arrested,
jailed with your sisters.

We too must remember,
you are human beings
young girls with dreams
women with dignity
craving to gain
control of your lives.

by Rebecca Cantwell