

# **WisCOSH HEALTH AND SAFETY NEWS**

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## **October 18<sup>th</sup> Health and Safety Conference: OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES OF CANCER**

Since 1971, the incidence of cancer has reached epidemic proportions, now striking nearly one in two men and more than one in three women in their lifetimes. The biggest increase has been in non-smoking related cancers, such as malignant melanoma, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, liver cancer, and breast cancer.

**Childhood cancers have increased by 32 percent since 1975, and leukemia is up 57 percent. In fact, cancer is second only to accidents as a cause of death in children.**

The National Cancer Institute and American Cancer Society assure us that progress is being made in the fight against cancer. But clearly, we are losing this war. Why should this be, given the billions of research dollars spent every year?

***Dr. Samuel Epstein and Dr. Janette Sherman believe we are losing the war on cancer because we have failed to recognize the real enemy.***

Billions of dollars are spent every year on research, screening, diagnosis, and treatment. But less than one penny per dollar is spent on prevention. That's because the cancer establishment refuses to acknowledge the occupational and environmental causes of cancer.

**On Saturday, October 18<sup>th</sup>, WisCOSH will host the William Hein Health and Safety Conference on the "Occupational and Environmental Causes of Cancer" from 9:30am to 1:30pm at the UWM Golda Meir Library Conference Center.**

**Dr. Samuel Epstein**, Professor Emeritus of Environmental and Occupational Medicine at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, will speak on the preventable causes of cancer. Epstein is chairman of the Cancer Prevention Coalition, which published a report in 2002 titled "Stop Cancer before It Starts: How to Win the Losing War against Cancer".

**Dr. Janette Sherman**, author of "Life's Delicate Balance: Causes and Prevention of Breast Cancer", will speak on the soaring breast cancer rate, and highlight preventive strategies. Sherman is the author of 70 articles probing the adverse health effects of exposure to pesticides, asbestos, and radiation. She identifies chemical carcinogens, ionizing radiation, endocrine disruptors, and genetic damage as primary suspects in the current epidemic of breast cancer and birth defects.

A **Panel Discussion** will talk about cancer clusters at work, environmental pollutants that can make you sick, and how to protect your child from exposure to harmful chemicals. Plan to be there as WisCOSH remembers health and safety advocate Bill Hein who died in 2001, celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and honors its Health and Safety Advocate of the Year.

Call 414-933-2338 for more information, email [info@wiscosh.org](mailto:info@wiscosh.org), or visit our website at [www.wiscosh.org](http://www.wiscosh.org).

## **Workers Memorial Day 2003: MOURN FOR THE DEAD, FIGHT FOR THE LIVING**

On April 28, WisCOSH and the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO commemorated Workers Memorial Day, with a memorial tribute to the 54 Wisconsin workers who died in 2002.

The event began at Zeidler Union Square Park with songs by labor solidarity folk singer Anne Feeney. WisCOSH Director **Frances Bartelt** welcomed participants and introduced **Cecilia Robertson**, who gave greetings from Senator Russell Feingold. **David Newby**, president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, spoke of the labor movement's fight for safe working conditions.

**John Goldstein**, president of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, introduced the keynote speaker, **E. Michael McCann**, Milwaukee County District Attorney. McCann is one of the few district attorneys in the country willing to use the power of his office to prosecute employers who violate workplace safety laws.

**Volunteers read the names of the 54 workers who died on the job in 2002.** Our list is incomplete, because the state provides the names of only those workers who receive a death benefit. It leaves out farmers and agricultural workers, as well as many workers who die of occupational illnesses. Even so, there were four who died from asbestos exposure.

Participants lit candles for the vigil and march to Postal Workers Hall. There they enjoyed a dinner and brief remarks by WisCOSH President **Irene Herron-Steeger**.

Labor Council President John Goldstein introduced **Steve Cagle, organizer for Laborers Union (LIUNA) Great Lakes Regional Organizing Committee**, who talked about his union's successful organizing efforts on behalf of Latino asbestos abatement workers.

Cagle explained that immigrant workers make up 75 percent of the asbestos industry, and 95 percent of the contractors are nonunion—or at least they were until recently. These contractors routinely ignored health and safety laws. They failed to provide workers with clean filters for their masks, or showers for decontamination. They cut corners and failed to set up proper containment areas for the work.

***“I believe the best weapon a worker has to fight for safe working conditions is their union,” Cagle said. “A union gives them a voice and the power to speak out. Laborers Local 113 here in Milwaukee taught me this.”***

The Laborers first big campaign was the Milwaukee Auditorium renovation project. They got a nonunion contractor removed from that project after they uncovered a scandal including bribery, falsification of records, and a release of asbestos that exposed hundreds of people on the worksite and in the surrounding area. The District Attorney's office is still investigating to see what charges should be brought.

**The Laborers have scored some stunning successes.** When they started, only five small contractors, representing less than 10 percent, signed the statewide asbestos agreement. Today the situation is dramatically different. **Today 70 percent of the asbestos is removed by union members.** Latino workers have made the biggest gains in wages, benefits, and safety on the job.

Cagle thanked the community groups who came to their aid, including Milwaukee Inner City Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH), Jobs with Justice, and Voces de la Frontera. He also acknowledged the crucial support of the State AFL-CIO and the building trades.

Custodial workers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee also won an important victory this spring. **Jenny Peshut, vice president of AFSCME Local 82, talked about her union's successful fight against team cleaning.** She explained that public employees are especially vulnerable in times of fiscal constraint, and managers may be tempted to cut corners on health and safety.

**To clean more buildings with fewer workers, UWM invented team cleaning.** This system reorganizes work so that custodians “specialize” in mopping, vacuuming, or restrooms. Doing the same job over and over again creates physical and emotional stress, and puts them at greater risk of repetitive strain injuries.

**Like the asbestos workers, the custodial workers reached out to the community** and won critical support from WisCOSH, Jobs with Justice, the Workers Rights Board, the Milwaukee County Labor Council, and elected representatives.

After a campaign of leafleting, picketing and demonstrations, the UWM administration agreed to end the team cleaning experiment. **Peshut credits “mobilized public opinion along with worker solidarity” for her union’s victory.** She thanked the students and rank and file workers at UWM for their support.

## ***New Gulf War Illness Reported in Iraq;*** **GULF WAR VETERANS SUE CHEMICAL COMPANIES**

Gulf War veterans have filed a lawsuit against chemical manufacturers from Europe and the United States seeking compensation for illnesses known as Gulf War Syndrome. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of more than 100,000 soldiers who suffered severe injuries and economic losses after they were exposed to toxic chemicals when U.S. forces blew up Iraqi ammunition dumps.

**The Department of Veterans Affairs has determined that more than 100,000 Gulf War veterans have at least 10 percent impairment from chemical exposure;** about 3,500 veterans have 70 percent impairment; and 1,200 veterans are 100 percent disabled. Symptoms include memory loss, deterioration of the nervous system and brain, chronic fatigue, confusion, and impairment of sensory acuity and coordination.

**The American Gulf War Veterans Association puts the numbers much higher. They say that nearly half of the 697,000 Gulf War veterans are now ill,** and more than 200,000 of those have requested disability, but have received no adequate diagnosis or treatment.

**The AGWVA also reports at least 100 cases of a “mystery” illness among U.S. troops currently serving in Iraq.** Three have died and 17 others have been transported to hospitals in Germany and placed on respirators. Pneumonia is the official explanation. Three additional soldiers have died in their sleep of unknown causes.

The Army Surgeon General’s office has dispatched epidemiological teams to Germany and the Middle East, but says it still does not know what is causing the illness. No death certificates have been issued for any of the soldiers who died. The families of the victims are demanding an independent civilian investigation.

## **WORKER'S COMPENSATION INSTITUTE**

**On October 6-10, 2003, the UW School for Workers is offering a 5-day Worker's Compensation Institute for union staff, local union officers, and members.** The program provides an overview of Wisconsin law and the procedures for filing claims. Recent changes in the law will also be addressed. Special problem areas in compensation will be discussed, including:

Back Injuries  
Disease Claims  
Hearing Loss  
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome  
Penalty Provisions  
Rehabilitation and Return to Work Programs  
Third Party Lawsuits  
Union Action Program

**Throughout the training, emphasis will be given to how unions can more effectively assist members in the WC system.** A labor member of the Advisory Council will discuss the role of the Council and how changes in the law occur. Instructors will include School for Workers staff, practicing attorneys, union representatives, health professionals and WC Division staff.

**This Institute is recommended if you:**

- are new to Worker's Compensation
- desire a more in-depth understanding of the system
- plan to represent members in hearings

***Registration deadline: September 5***

The program will be held on the UW-Madison campus at the J.F. Friedrich Center. For more information contact: Carol Graham, 608/262-4496, or email [carol.graham@uwex.edu](mailto:carol.graham@uwex.edu).

## **LET US KNOW HOW YOU LIKE OUR NEW LOOK**

As you've probably noticed, we are sending our WisCOSH newsletter via email for the first time. It greatly simplifies production and saves a bundle in printing costs. It also makes it possible for us to get news out to our members in a more timely way.

**We invite you to submit letters, announcements, meeting notices, and ideas for stories to [newsletter@wiscosh.org](mailto:newsletter@wiscosh.org).** We want to open the lines of communication in order to serve you better. Let us know what kind of reports and investigations you'd like to see.

**We want to start carrying a lot more local news, so we're relying on you for ideas. Do you know of a local health and safety issue that we should cover?** Is there a public health or occupational safety hazard that needs to be reported? Are there local unions that could use publicity and support for organizing drives or strikes?

Here's your opportunity to let us know what you think. Contact us at 414-933-2338 or [newsletter@wiscosh.org](mailto:newsletter@wiscosh.org). Thanks for your support.

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