

DOCUMENT re GE SHUTDOWNS

SHUTDOWN JOBS: “The Dirtiest Jobs!”

INTRODUCTION

This document, regarding “SHUTDOWNS” at General Electric (GE) in Peterborough, was requested by WSIB for a particular file currently in the WSIB claim process.

This is not a scientific document. Rather it is a descriptive in nature - put together from brief excerpts of interviews with retired GE workers.

The term “shutdown” was used to describe the work done when the whole GE plant was shut down in order that cleaning of equipment could be done. The process described below refers only to an historical practice. It is not the current practice.

The shutdowns for cleanup were ***done once a year in the summer for 3-5 weeks***. “The danger pay” was 10 cents/hour.

Many of these workers may not have realized that this was dangerous work and may not have reported the information at intake clinics/interviews for the claim process.

“The greenies” as they were labeled - junior employees, most recently hired and those seeking extra pay - were assigned and/or volunteered to do the shutdown work.

During interviews with workers who had worked alongside a particular claimant, it became clear that ***the information recorded might also be of use for any claimant who had worked “shutdowns”***.

Each claim would need to be considered separately by examining both the impact of the particular combination of chemical exposure during shutdown work and impact of these exposures in combination with the regular exposures during a worker’s regular work schedule.

The tanks and ovens referred to below varied in size: some 5’x4’ and others 15’x15’. There were more than 30 degreasing tanks as well as the Vapour Pressure Impregnation (VPI) tanks.

ANECDOTE: On a tour in 1997, George Bottick (CAW National Health & Safety) said to then-CAW President Buzz Hargrove: “Get me the hell out of here – this is a cesspool!”

SHUTDOWN WORK

1. The pattern of shutdown work was similar. The exposure to particular chemical toxins during shutdown work may or may not have been different depending on which ovens and tanks were cleaned: eg, Wire & Cable, Punch Press.

2. There was a regular crew assigned called “the labour gang”.

3. Other employees took holidays while junior and recently hired workers joined the labour gang to get the cleanup job done.

4. REPORT from WORKER A - volunteer member of our O&EHC-P
WORKER A reported the following about the work of the gang:

“The labour gang consisted of 18 men who did the dirtiest of all jobs. Only 3 are still alive.”

5. “There were three ‘trusted’ shutdown workers. Of the three, one has died, I have cancer and the other doesn’t want to get involved and also has cancer.” (WORKER A)

6. Workers went “in and down” the tanks and ovens to scrape and clean them out. At the bottom it was worse. **Often workers had to be hauled back up – close to passing out and/or losing consciousness.**

7. The tanks varied in size: some 5’x4’ and others 15’x15’. There were more than 30 degreasing tanks as well as the VPI tanks.

NOTE: However, in or near the tank, one would have been exposed to the same toxins. It didn’t matter whether you went into the tank or spent the time in the same space where the tank was being cleaned.

8. The ovens were operating – to heat/cook/bake - to solidify toxins in order that they could be scraped down. These ovens often leaked. There was **no ventilation and no protection other than gloves** worn by the workers.

9. Workers who were part of the shutdown crew went in every dirty space in order to clean up the plant.

10. Being in the building, one was exposed to all of the chemicals/industrial toxins in the building.

11. De-greasers were in use everywhere most of the time.

12. Sweeping up and cleanup duty was always HOT – both in the tanks and in the room.

13. **“Chemical soups”** is the phrase that best describes the toxins in the tanks. One of the toxins in the tanks was nicknamed “the epoxy icicles”.

14. **Toxins present in the tanks:** trichloroethylene (TCE), toluene, benzene, epoxy resins, methyl-ethyl-ketone (MEK), PTA, paints, methane, ethylene, ethane, propylene, propane, butane, methanol, acetone, acetaldehyde, Hydrofluoric acid, fluorates, phenols, cresols, bisphenyl A & many others. The high EM fields in the same space may also have had a serious impact.

CONCLUSION

It is the Occupational & Environmental Health Coalition - Peterborough’s (O&EHC-P) observation that the documentation in workers’ claims rarely includes the impact of toxin exposures for those workers who were part of the labour gang working shutdowns. In general, the O&EHC-P has found most claimants’ files are under reported and found to have missing information.

It is our opinion that the workers themselves were not aware of the potential impact of the exposures on long-term health and, therefore, did not volunteer the information. This omission was not intentional.

THE RITE OF PASSAGE

A bittersweet story - one in which the dirtiest of jobs and “the rite of passage” helped to build friendships and community. The sense of teamwork, and the experience of camaraderie, made the workplace fun and enjoyable for workers. Whereas this sense of community is too often missing in other workplaces, the community aspect of GE shutdown workplace practice cannot compensate for the long-term results on the workers’ health.

RECOMMENDATION: The O&EHC-P recommends that the historical, GE shutdown workplace-practice - the added toxin exposure - must be acknowledged and taken into account in a fair compensation review.

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July 2, 2013

Footnote: During the interviews with retired GE workers, other information - regarding wire & cable, pigeon & rat presence, cleanup/hygiene program practice & more - was documented. This information could be provided on request to O&EHC-P.