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## Chip Makers: Doctoring the Books?

**S**ilicon Valley chip makers are fuming over a hard-hitting TV expose of an industry effort to conceal job-related illnesses.

The lead story on KRON-TV's 6 pm news, broadcast May 27 and 28, charged local semiconductor manufacturers with keeping two sets of records for on-the-job exposures to toxic substances and systematically underreporting the number of workers affected by poison gases and liquids.

The newscasts sparked outraged denials by the companies involved and counter-accusations by South Bay environmentalists.

KRON also charged that through the creative abuse of "bureaucratic" jargon, chip makers have been able to claim up to 100 percent reductions in job-related "illness" by lumping under the category of "injuries" toxic chemical contamination previously classified as "illness." While the rate of semiconductor industry occupational disease remains significantly higher than the average for all industry, a simple semantic shift was all it took, KRON contended, to restore the chip makers' pristine public image.

KRON claimed further that the California Occupational Health and Safety Administration (Cal OSHA) was aware of the industry effort to doctor the books and has thus far failed to take action.

To chip makers already reeling from the impact of the industry's worst-ever recession and a sweeping decision by insurance companies to withdraw environmental liability coverage, the KRON expose seemed a vicious, blind-side assault.

The expose's centerpiece was a series of interviews with clean room employees who claimed medical disabilities caused by on-the-job exposure to toxic chemicals, backed by interviews with medical specialists.

"I thought it was absolutely atrocious," Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) spokesman John Greenagel told *Metro*. AMD is one of the chip makers singled out in the expose. Greenagel flatly denied any wrongdoing by his corporation.

"They [KRON] aired information that was false and they knew it was false," charged Greenagel.

"What we have said all along is that there are employees trying to receive compensation they don't deserve," explained Greenagel, referring to former AMD workers featured in the KRON report. "In some cases we don't believe there really are illnesses, and in the cases where there really are illnesses we don't believe they are work related, and we intend to prove that in court." Greenagel added that AMD is ethically constrained from making public the medical evidence to support their side of the story.

Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA) spokesperson Sheila Sandow denied the industry engages in the practices KRON alleged, and told *Metro* she suspects KRON was manipulated. "Behind that story is an attorney who represents at least two of the workers KRON interviewed," said Sandow, referring to Amanda Hawes, who is married to Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition director Ted Smith. The coalition represents about 100 public health, environmental, labor and neighborhood groups.

"I don't think Amanda Hawes has enough to win in court, so she's trying the case in the media," continued Sandow, adding, "Channel 4 allowed themselves to be used as a pawn in this."

Vic Lee, the KRON-TV reporter who broke the story, told *Metro* the station stands behind the story 100 percent. He says the report was based on state government documents and interviews with workers and denies Hawes was a major source of information or assistance.

"We get lulled into thinking the semiconductor industry is all powerful and can do no wrong," Ted Smith told *Metro*, "but occasionally they get caught with their fist in the cookie jar. They're squirming and screaming because they got caught and it hurts."

Smith freely admits some of the workers interviewed by KRON are represented by his wife, but believes that is irrelevant. "The point is, there are problems out there," said Smith. "They always try to discredit our work by calling it a scam between Mandy and me, and by accusing us of being a front for union organizing."

Greenagel said AMD had demanded a retraction of the story and was considering legal action against KRON for defamation. "It was very poorly done, irresponsible journalism, and the producer of that show is a liar," concluded Greenagel.

But Smith thinks the KRON report will aid the coalition's effort to raise public awareness about the dangers posed by toxic chemicals in Silicon Valley. "I think they should be given an award," said Smith. "It's the best piece of investigative journalism I've ever seen on local TV."

—Doug Millison