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Victims of High Tech, Workers Say

47 Former, Current GTE Employees in Suit Form Support Group To Deal With Illnesses

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JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Phyllis Olivas claims she is a casualty of high technology.

Mrs. Olivas, 60, began work in 1977 at the Albuquerque GTE Lenkurt plant, now GTE Communications Corp., which manufactures data and optical transmission devices.

"I began getting upset stomachs and diarrhea," she said. "My headaches were getting worse, and I kept getting one cold after another. ... Then I began getting pains in my back. One day at work it got so bad I could feel the pain all the way into my chest. I couldn't even move."

In May 1984, while on medical leave for a rest, she was diagnosed as having breast cancer and had to undergo a radical mastectomy. Upon returning for work, she was told she had been laid off, she said, and subsequently her insurance was can-

celed.

Mrs. Olivas is one of 47 former and current employees of GTE who are forming the core of a new support group in Albuquerque for people who believe they have suffered chemical injuries — Disabled Workers United.

The local group was formed after representatives of the California-based organization came to Albuquerque recently to speak with the GTE workers.

The 47 who have formed the group also are plaintiffs in lawsuits filed against GTE, requesting, among other things, compensation for medical expenses.

Nancy Colbert, a spokeswoman at GTE's headquarters in Phoenix, declined to comment individually on any of the court cases now pending. However, she categorically denied the Albuquerque plant has used chemicals that were either suspected or confirmed to cause cancer, or to illicit

mutations in body cells or cause malformations of fetuses.

She said there is no medical evidence to link the specific illnesses with exposure to specific chemicals.

According to Shirley Conrad, project coordinator for Disabled Workers United, the program serves as a mutual-aid and worker-rehabilitation organization. It allows chemically injured workers to talk to one another about their illnesses without fear of being accused "that it's all in their heads and that they're imagining it," said Ms. Conrad, who is based in California.

Amanda Hawes, an attorney representing workers in the Silicon Valley, is another supporter of the group. "Workers have a right to know what they're working with, and they have a right to refuse to work under unsafe conditions," she said. "They should trust their bodies if they are experien-

cing new problems, and those who expose them should be held accountable. Above all, they should know that they are not alone."

Ms. Colbert of GTE said the Albuquerque plant already "has a policy of providing a right-to-know program." That program, she said, has been in effect for several years, even though a federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration right-to-know policy will not become effective until May 1986.

Josephine Rohr, an Albuquerque attorney representing the 47 GTE workers, said their health problems closely parallel those of high-tech workers elsewhere with known exposure to specific toxins.

Although not active in the support group, she is responsible for getting it started through her contact with Ms. Conrad at a recent conference.