

Unions

Health worries give unions an opening into high technology

By Christopher H. Schmitt
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A highly publicized study already has raised questions about workplace safety in the semiconductor industry. Now semiconductor executives believe labor and worker advocacy groups are seizing on the issue as a first step toward trying to unionize their employees.

University of Massachusetts researchers recently caused a flurry when they reported that female production workers at a Digital Equipment Corp. chip plant in Massachusetts appeared to suffer a higher rate of miscarriages than other women. Chip executives claim the study is seriously flawed and have cautioned against overreaction.

Proposals

Meanwhile, a coalition of about 35 groups — including labor unions, women's rights groups and other organizations — has asked to meet with chip industry executives "to present proposals to minimize or reduce those risks (suggested in the DEC study) in ways that do not unfairly penalize, burden or otherwise discriminate against women or any specific group of employees."

The coalition says it is concerned because one industry re-

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— Coalition leader

ponse to the DEC study has been to remove female workers from production areas, rather than improve the workplace itself.

Chip executives say meeting with the coalition would amount to a recognition, of sorts, of the group as workers' representatives. And they believe that would be a prelude to an attempt at full-scale unionization of their employees.

"We believe there's motivation on the part of these people toward organizing the companies and grabbing hold of these (health) issues as a handle," says Tony Holbrook, president of Advanced Micro Devices Inc. of Sunnyvale.

A senior executive of another Silicon Valley chip maker adds: "There is no question in my mind: (Unions) try to find an issue and see what (they) can do with it. It's a basic strategy."

Sincere concerns

Coalition leaders say that their concerns are genuine and that their effort isn't part of an organization strategy.

George Kohl, special projects director of the Communications Workers of America, acknowledges that his union wants to establish a foothold in Silicon Valley. But Kohl, who is among the coalition leaders, denied the effort is a back door organizing move.

"It is something that leads to public awareness, but that in and of itself is not going to lead to an organizing drive," he said. "It's an expression of concern on behalf of unorganized workers."

Rand Wilson, another of the coalition leaders, said he wasn't surprised by executives' reactions.

"It's really a cheap shot to impugn the aims of the group," said Wilson, coordinator of a group called Integrated Circuit in Boston. "There's no question that unions seek to organize and represent working people, but to somehow use that to detract in any way from the validity of our concerns, is the earnestness of this effort, is really an example of the industry trying to throw up a smoke screen."

'It's your right'

The CWA has been running radio spots about the health issue raised in the DEC study. In part, one ad says: "People who work in computer chip plants face serious hazards from exposure to toxic chemicals. A safe and healthy workplace should not be a dream. It's your right. Call the Communications Workers of America."

A Silicon Valley labor-management attorney, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitive nature of the health issue, said the executives' fears may be at least partly justified.

"To recognize the unions as spokespeople for workers . . . does provide an additional form of recognition in the non-legal sense," the attorney said.

"There's probably a real concern about employees, but there's probably a lot of concern about the

unions getting a toehold in an industry that's hurting. Emotions make the management-labor issue in this case even tougher."

Though a meeting with the coalition might amount to a limited recognition, mounting a formal union-organizing drive would take far more effort. In a process that often polarizes workers and sours management-employee relations, workers would have to vote to approve a union as their legal bargaining agent. That has proven difficult in Silicon Valley.

Nonetheless, the coalition's effort "is an opportunity for the unions involved to show what they can do," said Jonathan S. Leonard, an associate professor of organizational behavior and industrial relations at the University of California at Berkeley.

It's unusual for unions to enter a situation uninvited, he said, but "the unions were always interested in Silicon Valley, if for nothing else than this is the work of the future." The current health concerns "probably heightens their interest in the valley."