

Making the workplace safer

left recently to become the president of the Telecommunications International Union. Ribeiro said the work was fulfilling, but often frustrating. Despite laws that protect a worker's right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions, and to know the dangers of chemicals used on the job, employees sometimes pay a costly sum for exercising that power — their job.

Ribeiro still remembers a call from a Spanish-speaking woman, who had refused to sign a form saying she'd received hazardous materials training, because the instruction had been in English, and she hadn't understood it. The company, a local chip maker, fired her. "I used to go home from work very upset," Ribeiro said. "Most of the production workers in Silicon Valley are minorities. Women make up 60 percent of the work force."

High incidence of illness

Medical experts like Joseph Ladou, a clinical professor in the Division of Occupational and Environmental Medicine at UC-San Francisco, say that despite an overall good record in occupational safety, the computer chip industry is troubled by an unusually high incidence of occupational illness.

Lee Neal, director of safety, health and environmental affairs for the Semiconductor Industry Association, a Cupertino trade group, says the industry has a good health record.

But the industry was shaken in 1986, when a Digital Equipment

Corp. study revealed a higher rate of miscarriages and general health problems among some chip workers.

Three years later, the SIA responded by launching a \$3.5 million, 3-year study to be carried out by UC-Davis. Three major companies are also conducting internal health studies.

Hawes said the UC-Davis researchers are treating the women who are expected to take part in the SIA study as "test species," because there is no mechanism for letting them know during the study if their work place is linked to reproductive problems.

"Women need to be able to answer the question: At this point in my pregnancy, is this the appropriate place to work," Hawes said. "If there is evidence as the study progresses that the answer to that question is 'no,' women should be told that," she said.

88 inspections revealed violations. While the industry has taken some steps to improve worker health and safety, some companies still don't adhere to the most basic work place regulations. In 1988, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration conducted inspections of 10 electronics firms in Silicon Valley.

Among the violations, the companies failed to mark containers of hazardous materials, to provide hazardous materials training, to maintain respirators, to teach employees how to use respirators in

an emergency, to install eye wash stations, to monitor airborne arsenic, or to provide fire extinguishers near flammable substances.

The agency cited the companies for 65 infractions of OSHA law. Four companies were fined a combined \$620 for violations that could lead to serious injury or death if an accident occurred — an average of \$155, or about the price of one speedy microprocessor chip.

Electronics workers aren't the only ones who rely on Hawes' group. Nurses, firefighters, teachers, and plumbers have also sought its counsel.

Its most recent project is teaching immigrants about chemical hazards — in the home, office or factory. Hawes and other volunteers act as guest lecturers in English as a Second Language classes. With close to four dozen languages spoken by Silicon Valley immigrants, it can be difficult to convey concepts related to chemical hazards.

"Things we've done have made a difference," she said. "We are a voice for a safe job and a healthy family. People are entitled to that. Not just because the law says they are entitled to that, but because it's the right thing to do."

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