

High-Risk High-Tech

BY KENT PATERSON

Albuquerque CONTINUES its drift away from smokestack industries, economic planners are looking to high technology to provide the jobs of tomorrow. Building on a 20-year phase of high-tech development, Southwestern cities from Austin to Albuquerque to Phoenix are aggressively seeking new computer-chip, printed-circuit-board and aerospace manufacturing firms. But like California's Silicon Valley, many of these communities already have suffered the side effects of what once was promoted as a clean industry: polluted groundwater, worker illness, rising housing costs and a widening gap between a well-paid managerial-technical class and a poorly paid production force.

A national campaign is underway, with grassroots organizers in high-tech centers like Albuquerque and Austin trying to redirect the industry toward an environmentally sensitive framework and to get the industry's companies to guarantee clean, stable employment in minority communities where much of the production goes on. Christened the Electronics Industry Good Neighbor Campaign, it is a collaboration of the Campaign for Responsible Technology and the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, an Albuquerque-based organization now working in seven western states.

"We're not against employers coming into the community. This is a campaign for responsible technology," said Frank Campos of Austin's People Organized in Defense of the Earth and its Resources (PODER), a Good Neighbor Campaign affiliate. "We're not against economic development. There has to be a balance between the type of industry that comes in, the benefits to the community, protection of the environment. All that is a package deal."

PODER, along with grassroots groups in five other states, conducted a summer-long organizing drive that included public forums, meetings with current and former workers and lobbying elected officials. In October, the campaign issued a number of demands to the semiconductor industry, as well as state and federal regulatory agencies, calling for increased research in methods to produce computer chips without the use of hazardous chemicals; greater attention to health and safety training; commitments to provide employment for local res-

idents first; caps on executive salaries in a business where individual compensation sometimes exceeds \$1 million; a ban on the use of temporary agencies in employment; and respect for workers' rights to organize.

"We're all going towards the same goal and we're finding out the same things," said Albuquerque organizer Aida Franco. Franco, who works for the Southwest Organizing Project, another campaign affiliate, has researched the health and environmental impact of large computer-chip makers and criticizes the high-tech industry for routinely giving the best jobs to

including Intel, Motorola and Digital, Sematech's goal is to regain the edge in the worldwide computer chip market for United States-based corporations. A fundamental objective of the Good Neighbor organizers is to move Sematech away from its relationship with the Department of Defense and, now that the Cold War has ended, to redirect Sematech toward environmental and civilian technological research. So far, the industry's response has been a mixture of reluctant discourse and outright refusal. Sematech, for instance, has conducted an on-and-off dialogue with campaign members, allowing activists to tour the consortium's facility in Austin on at least one occasion.

Sematech spokesman Scott Stevens said the research consortium supports the campaign's ecological goals and employs people who have a knowledge of environmental issues. He cites Sematech-backed research into equipment safety guidelines and minimization of gases and solvents in the production of silicon wafers as examples of the Sematech's leadership in the environmental arena. "So those folks who come to us are already environmentally versed," Stevens said.

Traditionally, high-tech industries have used solvents, toxic gases and acids to clean circuit boards or clean material from silicon wafers used in the production of chips. Medical research has linked these substances, and the heavy metals also involved in the process, to cancer, miscarriage, central nervous system damage, severe headaches, memory loss and other ailments. The campaign is pressuring the industry — which in its pro-

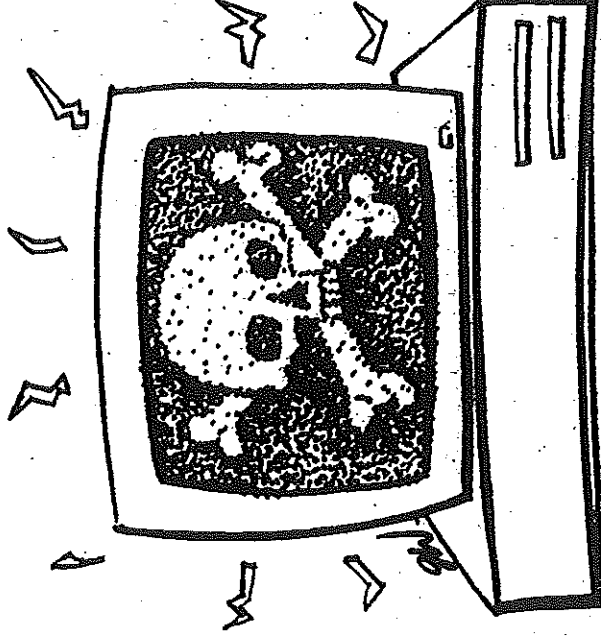
duction facilities employs predominantly women of color of child-bearing age — to devote more attention to employee safety. Concern about pre-natal risks increased after last year's release of a preliminary report of a Johns Hopkins University study of IBM chip workers in New York and Vermont. The study found a high rate of miscarriages, as did a similar study conducted at a Digital factory in Massachusetts in 1986. Nationally, the Semi-Conductor Industry Association (SIA), a trade group established in 1977 to represent U.S. corporations in the global marketplace, is sponsoring a health study of 18,000 workers at computer companies across the country. Results should be released sometime this winter. Yet already a growing number of workers claim illness as a result of exposure to toxic materials at high-tech work sites. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Albuquerque, a city already known in occupational-health circles for having the worst cluster of poisoned high-tech workers in the United States.

white males while locking line workers — mainly women of color — into the most dangerous jobs. "There's no promotional avenue. There's no way of becoming technicians," said Franco. "If you're hired in the labor force, that's all you're going to stay — a laborer."

Last year the Good Neighbor Campaign won a victory when Congress authorized \$10 million to be included in the budget of Sematech, the Austin-based computer-chip research consortium, for research into development of an environmentally benign chip.

Campaign organizers had lobbied Congressman Ron Dellums, a California Democrat, to include the money in the 1993 Defense Reauthorization Act. The legislation requires Sematech to consult with environmental and labor groups to decide how to spend the money. Elected leaders of the Southwest Network and the CRT then called on individual computer companies to match Sematech's upcoming expenditure.

Formed by 12 of the largest chip producers,



GAIL WOODS

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Many worked at the old GTE-Lenkurt plant between 1972 and 1986, where chemicals were used to clean circuit boards under poorly-ventilated conditions some employees have likened to a "gas chamber." Mary Lou cDe Baca began working at the factory during the early 1970s when she was in good health and 32 years old. Within a few months, she began to suffer internal bleeding and as a result underwent a hysterectomy. Gum troubles, searing headaches and insomnia soon followed. "My children and husband had to drive me to the doctor and cook for me," she said. cDe Baca said she earned a better-than-average salary at GTE-Lenkurt but: "They were paying us to die."

Nearly 200 GTE-Lenkurt workers filed a workers' compensation lawsuit against the company in the mid-1980s and later settled out of court. The corporation has steadfastly denied responsibility for the health complaints. In 1987, 457 former GTE-Lenkurt workers and their dependents joined a lawsuit seeking: on product liability grounds, billions of dollars from several chemical manufacturers, alleging the companies failed to warn GTE-Lenkurt of their products' hazards. More settlements followed, with the last defendant in the case, Dow Chemical, going on trial earlier last year in U.S. District Court in Houston. The jury decided in Dow's favor, although lawyers reportedly are negotiating a settlement in the case.

Some industry insiders concede the poor safety and environmental record of high-tech industry in its formative years, but insist that the businesses are cleaning up their act and searching for new methods and for processes to substitute for hazardous chemicals, while safeguarding workers in situations where no alternative to chemicals is feasible.

The SIA's Beerman, for example, calls the semiconductor business "a model for other industries" in terms of worker health and safety. Beerman cites Bureau of Labor Statistics figures that show less occupational illness in electronics than in other industries. When industry leaders were informed of the Johns Hopkins-IBM study, Beerman notes, many semiconductor employers met with their employees to discuss the possible hazards and to offer workers the option to transfer to tasks that did not involve chemical exposure. "We're not trying to hide anything from anybody," he said. "We're trying to put all the information out on the table and let workers and their doctors judge, you know, what course of action to take."

Nonetheless, reports of high-tech workplace hazards continue to surface. PODER, for example, documented a May 19, 1992, incident at the Advanced Micro Devices plant in Austin, in which 28 workers received medical treatment after a hydrochloric acid spill.

High-tech hazards are not confined to the private sector. In December, for example, Albuquerque's Sandia National Laboratories, facing workers' compensation claims, released the results of a Duke University study on the health of 25 current and former microelectronics laboratory employees who used chemical solvents to clean electronics parts at the plant, which contracts with the U.S. Department of Energy. Although the study was limited by the lack of

health monitoring data, the Duke researchers concluded that the employees probably suffered temporary sickness from chemical exposure, with some showing signs of brain damage associated with solvent poisoning. The number of affected workers could be higher, since the study group was made up of volunteers and did not include everyone who worked in the electronics section.

Strategists working on the Good Neighbor Campaign are using the worker health issue as ammunition in a battle to force high-tech companies to become more socially responsible. Since much of high tech's growth is underwritten through direct or indirect public subsidies, the campaign wants an end to "whipsawing," a process by which private companies play one locality against another in search of the best deal in tax breaks, infrastructure and educational support and a hospitable regulatory climate.

One popular device cities and government entities employ to attract high-tech firms is the industrial revenue bond, which typically has provisions for property tax exemptions and sometimes includes tax-free interest earnings privileges for the private investors who purchase the bonds. Industry critics, such as PODER's Campos, have been critical of public underwriting of corporations which operate with no citizen input, play down environmental hazards, then locate or relocate as suits their needs. To underscore their point, industry critics charge that high-tech industries often locate where school and social services are already strained by budgetary difficulties and unemployment rates dictate a jobs-at-all-costs attitude.

"Many times what happens is that communities that are competing for companies to locate in their communities offer such great incentives, it's coming out of the pockets of the people who can least afford to do that," said Campos, "and we feel that we shouldn't be pitting one community against another or one state against another."

In today's economic climate, however, proponents of economic development are stepping up efforts to attract high-tech companies to their communities. One example is the behind-the-scenes competition among Texas, New Mexico and other states for a possible new Intel computer-chip plant. Governor Ann Richards, accompanied by the mayors of Austin, San Antonio and Fort Worth, flew to California last summer in an attempt to convince Intel Chairman Gordon Moore to locate his company's proposed new production facility in Texas.

Texas faces some stiff competition. The computer giant, which witnessed record profits in 1992, is expected to announce this winter whether it will build a new plant, with an estimated 1,000 on-site jobs and another 1,500 in contracted services, or expand existing plants. Rio Rancho, New Mexico, the Albuquerque suburb where Intel already employs 2,100, last spring approved a record \$1 billion industrial revenue bond package in an attempt to entice Intel to expand its existing New Mexico facility. The *Albuquerque Journal* noted the bond issue equalled nearly one-half of the entire state budget.

Although Intel and state officials in Texas and New Mexico are tight-lipped about the com-

pany's plans, Texas is still in the running for a factory. Good schools and the overall quality of life are as important as tax breaks and labor costs according to Intel spokesman Howard High Kathy Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the Texas Department of Commerce, cited advantages such as a good highway network, proximity to Mexico superior technical training at the university level and the proven ability of the University of Texas to transfer technology to the private sector. "The cities [Intel is] considering offer a lot of the attributes they're looking for," Schwartz said. "Texas has a good base of high tech. Texas is in a good strategic position to become a leader in moving resources to the marketplace."

Whether Intel decides to move to Texas or not will probably matter little. The state is already established as a leader in the emerging industry and Bill Clinton's Administration probably will move high-tech industries to center stage in a restructured economic system in which the United States undertakes to reposition itself in the world's markets.

As a response, the Electronics Industry Good Neighbor Campaign is trying to coordinate grassroots community, labor and environmental movement aimed at reforming the most dynamic sector of the economy. Until now said campaign analyst Lenny Siegel of the Pacific Studies Center in Mountain View California, policy debates over the direction of high tech have taken place within a narrow spectrum of the right wing, with one branch in favor of a free-market approach and another in support of state intervention.

"And there's never been a third voice nationally on the promoting of technology based on the needs of the people as a whole and involving the people in their communities and determining what that technology does," Siegel contends. "And what we're doing is not only giving a voice to that on a national scale, but rooting it in the communities that are most affected." □