UNITED STEELWORKERS

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UNITY AND STRENGTH FOR WORKERS

Local 3657

Health, Safety and Environment Committee

July 2016 Report

WATER SAFETY:

After our heated exchange at the June local union meeting regarding the release of water testing results, our local Health, Safety and Environment Committee decided that we needed to step back and share some background on the science and history of what we know about *Legionaire's Disease*, or *Legionellosis*.

Making Our Workplace Safer

Our building management reacted promptly after routine tests of the water system in February showed evidence of the bacilli. After attempting to flush the systems with hot water, a copper silver ionization unit was installed. To date, management has refused to give our local the requested laboratory results so we cannot determine whether or not this technique has been successful.

Globalization Affects Our Water?

When Steelworkers think of globalization, we think about steel, paper and tires being dumped into the US markets from low wage nations on the other side of the oceans. But globalization has impacted more than our international trade and industrial production. Increased global trade has brought new plants, animals and microbes to our cities and towns and climate change is beginning to alter the ranges where these new life forms will survive.

Unknown before an outbreak at the 1976 Philadelphia convention of the American Legion, Legionellosis is a growing public health concern in the United States, particularly in the Middle Atlantic states. Scientists have seen an abrupt increase in incidence over the past 25 years. From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on increased incidence in the disease:

"During 2000–2014, passive surveillance for legionellosis in the US demonstrated a 286% increase in reported cases per 100,000 population.

It is unclear whether this increase represents artifact (due to increased awareness and testing), increased susceptibility of the population, increased Legionella in the environment, or some combination of factors."

Infection was most commonly reported in the summer or fall, in persons aged 45-64, with incidence rates higher in men than women.

Vectors for Infection

Legionella bacilli thrive where water temperature is higher than ambient temperature, such as cooling towers from air-conditioning units in large buildings, water fountains, humidifiers, etc. The bacilli use a broad range of protozoan species (large single-cell life-forms like amoeba) that they invade and take over in order to reproduce and spread. They need hosts and warm water to reproduce, so shower heads, cooling coils, unused or rarely used faucets, might be ideal environments.

Legionella bacilli enter the human body through inhalation of contaminated water droplets. Water that is ingested by drinking is

not generally a problem. Nor has there been any evidence of person to person transmission of disease.

Future Vigilance

Because we now live in a world facing climate change and unintended global biological exchanges, we have to be on the lookout for unexpected challenges. Every week we see another upsetting news story: *Legionella at Allegheny General Hospital! Piranha in the lake at North Park! Zika virus in common mosquitos!* Folks, this is news, not a zombie invasion!

It is likely that many, if not most, of the high rise buildings in the city of Pittsburgh, are encountering or will soon encounter, one or more of the legionella bacilli varieties in their water systems (identified to date by 42 "species" and 64 "serogroups"). Our environment is changing and new bacteria are part of the change.

As a result, our water systems need to be tested regularly for new or repeated contamination. We don't need to get freaked out or hide from the facts. We need to learn more about our changing world and help each other to live with changing circumstances.

We will continue to press for all past and future test results, which we are legally entitled to have. It is important for each of us to know the specific bacteria and serogroup to which we might have been exposed in order to receive proper testing (blood, urine and/or sputum), so we can manage illnesses and achieve better health.

Legionnaires' Disease is an acute, pneumonia-like bacterial infection characterized by high fever, malaise, muscle aches, respiratory disorders and headache. Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics. The incubation period is from 2 to 19 days.

Pontiac fever is a milder infection caused by the same type of *Legionella Bacteria*. The symptoms usually last for 2 to 5 days and may also include fever, headaches, and muscle aches (myalgia; however, there is no pneumonia). Symptoms usually go away without treatment.

Here are our goals:

1. Secure a copy of all employee exposure records, that is, test results from all past tests of the water and air in our building.
2. Secure for everyone who works in our building all future test results and the information they need to be properly tested and appropriately treated.
3. Work with management to get faucet aerators replaced with low flow, low spray technology.
4. Take all showers in the building out of service. Don't expose engineers to a potential hazard.
5. Provide education on the water situation to all in the building, with quarterly updates.
6. Provide hand sanitizer for all departments and washrooms.
7. Develop open communications between our local and management in order to move forward and manage our changing world.

USW Local 3657 Health, Safety and Environment Committee, June 2016:

Steffi Domike, convener (Education)
Deb Edwards (Collective Bargaining)
Lawrence Goun (Collective Bargaining)
Diane Heminway (Strategic Campaigns)
Janet Hill (Collective Bargaining)
John Lepley, ex-officio (Education)
Julie Lidstone (Collective Bargaining)
Lynda Nathenson (Political)
Sharon Thompson (Health & Safety)