

# As cases of 'popcorn workers lung' spread, unions demand action from federal OSHA

**Hundreds of workers are contracting severe lung diseases from exposure to diacetyl, a chemical in butter flavoring**

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

There's something in the popcorn. Government agencies say consumers are safe, but workers exposed day in and day out to diacetyl, a butter-flavored chemical additive, are coming down with severe lung diseases at an alarming rate. That includes workers in the chemical factories that make the stuff, as well as workers in plants making microwave popcorn.

Lung diseases that are almost never found in patients under 40 years old, like bronchiolitis obliterans (chronic scarring of the airways), are turning up among workers exposed to diacetyl.

Diacetyl workers are also being diagnosed with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema and severe lung impairment at far higher rates than normal.

Late last year, the Teamsters Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers appealed to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to do something about it. Both unions are affiliated with the Change to Win labor federation.

In June, 14 members of Congress, led by Democrat Lynn Woolsey of California, introduced a bill to speed things up. House Resolution 2693, the Popcorn Workers Lung Disease Prevention Act, would require OSHA to issue rules limiting exposure, set up medical monitoring of exposed workers, and require protective equipment and safer procedures.

Diacetyl is used for aroma and taste in butter, some cheeses and in snack and bakery products. It occurs natu-

rally in butter and in beer, but not in the concentrated form workers are exposed to. It's another case of the saying "the dose makes the poison" — something safe at low levels becomes harmful when concentrated, and in this case inhaled.

In March 2004, a Missouri jury ordered International Flavors and Fragrances, Inc. and a subsidiary to pay \$20 million to a former microwave popcorn worker whose lungs were so badly injured as to require a lung transplant.

The San Francisco-based Lief Cabraser law firm is representing a growing list of diacetyl plaintiffs in lawsuits. [Lief Cabraser also represents Wal-Mart workers in a class-action suit over off-the-clock work.]

Lief Cabraser attorney Steve Casidy said there are no diacetyl plaintiffs in Oregon or Washington yet. Oregon OSHA has been monitoring what's been happening at the federal level, says spokesperson Kevin Weeks, but it's not clear there are manufacturing plants in Oregon that are exposing workers to diacetyl on an ongoing basis. If a federal standard goes into effect, state agencies would be required within six months to adopt it or set their own standards at least as vigorous.

In this case, California OSHA has been out in front of federal OSHA on

diacetyl. The California Assembly passed legislation to urge Cal-OSHA to make the regulation of diacetyl a high priority, and Cal-OSHA has begun screening flavoring industry workers before and after exposure to diacetyl.

But California Labor Federation legislative advocate Jeremy Smith is also concerned about the risk to other kinds of workers who are exposed, like bakery workers adding butter flavoring to icing.

Though the companies that make diacetyl are nonunion, Smith has been attending California OSHA meetings about diacetyl for a year, thanks to a state law that gives organized labor a seat at the table with industry when new safety rules are worked out. Occupational safety experts from UFCW and Teamsters headquarters have also been flying out to attend the meetings.

"Unfortunately, they're not testing downstream users," Smith said. "For example, go into a grocery store, to the bakery counter, where they're frosting a birthday cake. They're probably around some level of diacetyl."

"NIOSH [the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health] has been looking at it for 15 years," Smith said, "and they can't put their finger on permissible exposure level."

"If they would just use real butter, people wouldn't get sick," he added.

## Health care is main issue in strike at Columbia Ford

LONGVIEW, Wash. — Health care insurance — and who should pay for it — has led to another strike in the Pacific Northwest.

The latest is at Columbia Ford here, where 31 mechanics and parts and lube department workers — members of Machinists Lodge 1350 and Teamsters Local 58 — walked off the job June 18 over the issue of capping health insurance payments.

Columbia Ford wants to cap its monthly contributions for health insurance at \$650 per worker. That means Machinists would have to immediately start paying \$133 a month out of pocket and Teamsters would have to pay \$100 a month out of pocket.

Workers say they are wary of how much more they would pay as future health insurance costs continue to rise.

"We are not asking for the world here," said Brian King, Teamsters Local 58 business agent. Local 58 represents 10 striking workers. "Our proposals have been reasonable but the company's offer amounts to less take-home pay for the workers who will be forced to nearly triple their monthly payments for health care."

Three years ago employees changed insurance plans to save the dealership money. "They took a lesser plan and less benefits," Dan Morgan, a Machinists business agent, told the Longview Daily News.

Last week the company began advertising for replacement workers.

I've helped you design and build factories all over the west. Now I'd like to help you build wealth, and help design your residential, investment and commercial real estate portfolio.

Lyman Warnock, Broker

503-860-7724

email: lymanwarnock@msn.com

website: oregonfirst.com/lymanwarnock



When You Think Real Estate, Think  
**Oregon First**

*Lyman*  
REAL ESTATE

## SERVING UNIONS FOR OVER 25 YEARS



### QUALITY, AFFORDABLE FAMILY DENTAL CARE

- ☺ General, cosmetic, and specialty care
- ☺ Most insurance and union plans accepted
- ☺ Easy credit and low monthly payments, O.A.C.
- ☺ Evening and Saturday appointments
- ☺ Ask about our **ConiDent** Dental Discount Program

**BEAVERTON, OR\***  
4655 S. W. Griffith Dr.  
Beaverton, OR 97005  
(503) 644-1400  
Ben Sutter IV, D.M.D.

**GRANTS PASS, OR**  
1021 N.E. 6th St.  
Grants Pass, OR 97526  
(541) 479-6696  
Matt Hill, D.M.D.  
Warren Grether, Denturist

**GRESHAM, OR**  
443 N.W. Burnside Rd.  
Gresham, OR 97030  
(503) 492-8487  
Vicki Reichlein, D.M.D.  
Brandon Lee, D.M.D.

**HILLSBORO, OR**  
**ORENCO STATION\***  
7206 N.E. Cornell Rd.  
Hillsboro, OR 97124  
(503) 640-9999  
Irene Glanville, D.M.D.

**MILWAUKIE, OR**  
17186 S.E. McLoughlin Blvd.  
Milwaukie, OR 97267  
(503) 659-2525  
Linh Tran, D.M.D.  
Dmitriy Lyubchenko, D.M.D.

**PORTLAND, OR**  
3580 S.E. 82nd Ave.  
Portland, OR 97266  
(503) 777-0761  
Adam Ho, D.D.S.  
Tom Hicks, D.M.D.

**SALEM, OR**  
831 Lancaster Mall Dr. NE.  
Salem, OR 97301  
(503) 362-8359  
Sean Hansen, D.M.D.  
Julie Dewey, D.D.S.  
Michelle Kirkpatrick, D.M.D.

**WILSONVILLE, OR**  
25700 S.W. Argyle Ave.  
Wilsonville, OR 97070  
(503) 682-8552  
Jeffrey Dewey, D.D.S.

**VANCOUVER, WA**  
**FISHER'S LANDING**  
3250 S.E. 164th Ave.  
Vancouver, WA 98683  
(360) 891-1999  
Peter Vu, D.M.D.  
Charles Stirewalt, D.D.S.  
Chau Ngo, D.D.S.

**VANCOUVER, WA**  
**SALMON CREEK**  
2101 N.E. 129th St.  
Vancouver, WA 98686  
(360) 574-4574  
Phong Bui, D.M.D.  
Charles Stirewalt, D.D.S.  
Chau Ngo, D.D.S.

\*A New Bright Now! Dental Location.

**Protecting Union Member  
Smiles and Wallets.  
ORTHODONTICS AVAILABLE!**

**1-888-BRIGHT NOW**

www.BRIGHTNOW.com



Northwest Dental Associates, P.C./Stirewalt, P.C.  
©2007 Bright Now! Dental, Inc.

**Bright Now! Dental**

A BETTER WAY TO SEE THE DENTIST.

**NORTHWEST LABOR PRESS** Call 503-288-3311

**Subscribe Today!**

Receive 24 issues of the latest labor news and views from Oregon and Southwest Washington

**Special group rate of \$7.92 on orders of 50 or more**

Mail To: Northwest Labor Press  
P.O. Box 13150  
Portland, OR 97213

Name/Union Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_