

Letter from a Detroit school bus driver

29 June 2002

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site .

Your article, "Bush administration moves to gut Clean Air Standards," by Joseph Kay, was of great interest to me. I have recently learned that some of the same toxic emissions that are being spewed out by power plants are also contained in diesel exhaust fumes and that my job brings me in dangerous contact with them every day.

I am a school bus driver in Detroit. Working conditions are very unhealthy for all the employees at my work site. The conditions over the last two years are the worst I have seen in the 22 years I have been working here. Every morning 200 buses start up their engines at about the same time and the air is filled with diesel fuel fumes.

I wrote a letter to the state health and safety agency and I told them I thought the diesel exhaust fumes at my work site were affecting my health and the health of others I work with. I received a letter back giving me a breakdown showing how toxic diesel exhaust gas is.

What toxic chemicals are in diesel exhaust? Those of most concern include nitric oxide and nitrogen dioxide. The higher average temperature of combustion of diesel engines generates more oxide of nitrogen than gasoline engines. The fumes also contain sulfur dioxide, and various aldehydes, primarily formaldehyde as well as acetaldehyde and acrolein. A recent study found that diesel exhaust contains 40 hazardous air pollutants, including benzene. Carbon monoxide and various hydrocarbons and particulates are also in the fumes

What are the health effects of these chemicals in diesel exhaust? Some effects are immediate but others take years of exposure. High concentrations of oxides of nitrogen can cause headaches, dizziness and loss of consciousness as well as respiratory irritation. Sulfur dioxide, a pungent gas, may cause immediate respiratory distress. The aldehydes are also pungent gases and cause eye, nose and throat irritation.

These are the kind of symptoms workers at my workplace complain of regularly. Some employees have quit their jobs because these exhaust fumes make you ill and cause you to take off too much sick time.

Many of the people I work with have upper respiratory problems. In January one of my co-workers died from an asthma attack. She had worked with me at my site for 15 years. She was only 44 years old.

Several workers at my job have died at a young age from cancer. The report from the state agency said that lung cancer has been found in workers who inhaled diesel exhaust over a period of 10 to 20 years. The formaldehyde and hydrocarbons in diesel exhaust cause cancer in laboratory rodents and may cause cancer in humans exposed over a period of years. Women who get pregnant who work with me sometimes have miscarriages. When they work for several months during pregnancies the babies are born with low birth weight.

I also have become very ill from inhaling the fumes from the exhaust diesel gases that come from the buses. These are the effects that these toxic chemicals exhaust fumes have on me: headache, burning eyes and throat, dizziness, chest pain. I am now taking three inhalers for my respiratory condition: albuterol, Rhinocort Aqua, and Allegra. The doctor gave me an epinephrine auto injection, which is the worst one of all. I have to make the injection in my outer thigh when I have a serious attack.

I am also concerned about the schools near our work site because the diesel exhaust could affect many children. We do not know how many children these toxic exhaust gases have affected already or what effect they have on pregnant women and their babies. Are these toxic gases causing birth defects?

A report came out early this year by the Union of Concerned Scientists. School bus fleets in every state were graded on the emissions of particulates, smog-forming pollution and greenhouse gases from the

average state school bus. The report said. “As they wait on the curb, play near idling buses, or even ride safely inside the bus, children may be exposed to this noxious substance every school day.”

An “A” on the *Pollution Report Card* meant the emissions matched the level of emissions from an existing cleaner technology—natural gas buses. No state even came close to receiving that grade. Nearly half the states did poorly or flunked.

There are about a half-million school buses on the road and 90 percent are diesel. They warn that even today’s diesel clean-up technologies may not be adequate to reduce toxic emissions over a fleet life span. Some buses remain on the road 20, 30 and even 40 years.

Buses built before 1990 and 1991 are exempt from even current pollution regulations. These older buses currently make up about a third of buses currently in operation. They are allowed to release at least six times more toxic soot and nearly three times more nitrogen oxides than newer models.

“Many school districts do not have the resources to replace older school buses with newer, cleaner models. Some states make school districts choose between new buses and other educational expenses.” As for cleaner natural gas school buses, the report says they cost about \$35,000 more up front than a diesel school bus.

We need to protect children from what really amounts to murder. A study in 2000 by air pollution control officials and administrators estimated that diesel may be responsible for over 125,000 additional cancers in the United States over a lifetime of exposure.

Beside this, management does not think about the workers. If the students are sick after an exposure to fumes, what about the workers who drive the buses all day and who are at the terminal every morning when 200 buses are all in close proximity in the terminal yard and are idling for more than an hour?

When I contacted the state health and safety agency, I had no clue that these fumes were so toxic. I was surprised that in the two decades I had been working as a bus driver, no one ever spoke about the harm that toxic gases could do to workers and, for that matter, to students’ health. The Teamsters union, which covers workers at my job, did not warn us and is not doing anything to ensure that workers do not have to be exposed to these dangerous fumes.

MM

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