Tennessee auto parts workers and their families exposed to cancer-causing chemicals

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Workers at a Smithville, Tennessee auto parts manufacturing and fabricating plant are facing years of not knowing if chemicals they and their families were exposed to will be the source of lung cancer and other serious diseases.

Company officials told the Tenneco Inc. workers in March of their on-the-job exposure and the likelihood that they had carried the toxic waste home with them as dust on their clothing.

The investigative story was broadcast this week by WKRN NewsChannel 5 in Nashville.

Supervisors notified employees last spring only after inspectors with the Tennessee Occupational and Safety Health Administration (TOSHA) cited the plant for 20 serious violations including exposure to hexavalent chromium, a byproduct of welding and a well-established carcinogen.

Exposure to hexavalent chromium can cause a variety of diseases, including nasal and sinus cancers, kidney and liver damage, nasal and skin irritation and ulceration, and eye irritation and damage.

Tenneco, a Fortune 500 company based in Lake Forest, Illinois, boasts of being an $8.6 billion global manufacturing company with 31,000 employees and 93 manufacturing facilities in 24 countries, including France, Germany, Belgium, India, China, Poland and Argentina.

The Smithville plant, which apparently does not have a union, manufactures mufflers, catalytic converters and exhaust systems for General Motors, Toyota, Nissan, Honda and Chrysler. Ironically it is one of 13 Tenneco facilities that produces “clean air” products designed to meet global emission standards.

It was heart-wrenching to see Ryan Johnson, a welder at the Smithville plant since 2011, express his love and fears for a young daughter who may have been exposed to toxic dust he unknowingly brought home on his clothes.

"First thing I see in the morning is my daughter. She comes running up to me and I hold her," Johnson said, adding he hugs her when he returns home.

“I’m afraid I have given her a little bit of exposure to it,” Johnson worried. “(At)this last safety meeting it was confirmed that we are taking it home to our families.”

"The last thing I want to do is have my daughter in my arms while she's hugging me and her sitting there breathing in the dust right off my uniform," Johnson told the television reporter.

Johnson added that he already suffers from nose bleeds and dermatitis, two symptoms of exposure.

Leo Chang is another worker who has worked at the Smithville plant since September. Chang said the company’s behavior was “unacceptable” and that he was angry.

“Oh, you’d better believe it,” he told the reporter.

What was not mentioned in the television story was what would happen to the employees and their families now. Who would see to the cost of their care if, because of the company’s criminal negligence, they or their children developed cancer or other health problems?

There was no evidence in the story that these questions were ever asked by the NewsChannel 5 reporter, were ever raised by TOSHA officials or were ever volunteered by the multinational corporation. One shudders to imagine what the working conditions must be like in India and China.

A follow-up story the next day revealed only that the company would be required to install a multi-million-dollar ventilation system to eliminate the danger and that respirators issued to the workers did not fit.

Tenneco has a long history of OSHA violations that

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exposed workers to hazardous conditions.

Twice in the last five years, the company has faced fines at its Hartwell, Georgia plant associated with employee exposure to the same substance, hexavalent chromium. Of 16 safety and health violations reported, 14 were considered serious.

"Those violations included failing to protect employees from exposure to hexavalent chromium and ensuring that employees working with and around the toxic chemical compound removed their contaminated clothing and showered before exiting the facility after a shift," the Lavonia, Georgia, radio station WLHR reported in February 2012.

The company had already been cited in October, just five months earlier, for the same violations.

The radio station also reported because of the violations the company faced $90,000 in fines. Those violations included failing to develop a plan to limit exposure, not providing a separate storage area or change area for personal protective equipment used by workers, failing to consult a physician about the chromium exposures, not maintaining an eyewash station, failing to provide clean work surfaces free from chromium accumulations and failing to dispose of waste by using a sealed container.

The radio station then reported two years later in 2014 that Tenneco had been placed on OSHA's Severe Violator Enforcement Program for what OSHA's officials described as the company's "demonstrating indifference to its OSHA Act obligations to provide a safe and healthful workplace for employees."

"In 2010, 2012, and 2013, Tenneco was cited for numerous and repeated safety violations and at one point was sued by a group of employees who claim they became ill after being exposed to the chemical hexavalent chromium," the radio station reported.

Tenneco's crimes against workers goes back decades.

In 1980, a Tenneco Inc. subsidiary, Newport News Shipbuilding Co. of Virginia, was fined more than three-quarters of a million dollars for what OSHA officials described as more than 600 violations of health and safety regulations, the *Washington Post* reported then.

The story reported that federal inspectors said that the shipyard's workforce of 23,000 "were exposed to excessive levels of asbestos, chromate, silica, cadmium and other toxic substances."

At the time, the $786,000 fine was largest in the history—more than twice any fine levied by OSHA, then only nine years old.

On the online employment and job evaluation site Indeed.com, some Tenneco welders past and present complained about their treatment and concerns over health hazards.

"Absolutely God Awful! There are not enough bad words to describe this hellhole…. After a year of abuse I walked out after lunch. People are humans not slaves. Period," one former employee from the Hartwell, Georgia plant wrote in July of this year.

Another welder/fabricator from the Jefferson, Indiana facility wrote in September: "Extremely fast paced environment. No air conditioning. Subpar management staff, bare minimum breaks, must ask permission to go to the restroom… [and] employees are an expendable value."

In March of 2016, a former Tenneco welder wrote: "The company failed to repair ventilation systems after failing air sensor tests for hex chrome for double the OSHA standards," while a Marshall, Michigan, Tenneco welder complained in October 2014: "The hardest part about the job was the job itself, the hours were long with very little break time. The heat was intense, and conditions were hazardous. Weld fumes were poorly vented."

Another Michigan welder wrote of Tenneco, "The hardest part of this job was dealing with the smoke from the welder."

Smithville is about 65 miles east of Nashville. It has a population of about 4,600. The median family income is $35,853, about $14,000 less than the state median of $47,275. The unemployment rate is around 7 percent.

According to City-Data.com the poverty rate in 2015 was 37.3 percent.

Decent paying jobs are hard to come by. When asked why he just didn't quit Tenneco, Ryan Johnson replied, "There is no better paying job than this anywhere around."

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