

Statement by the AFL-CIO Executive Council

on

Smoking and the Workplace

February 19, 1986

Sal Harbour, FL

The 1985 Surgeon General's Report on The Health Consequences of Smoking -- Cancer and Chronic Lung Disease in the Workplace -- has focused new attention on smoking and occupational disease. The report purports to be a review of available scientific evidence on the combined risks of smoking and exposure to known occupational hazards. Rather than shedding light and contributing new information on the occupational health problems faced by many workers, the report minimizes the risks posed by workplace toxins. Broad conclusions are reached that smoking poses a greater risk to workers than their workplace environment, yet there is no evidence in the document to support these findings. The AFL-CIO believes that employers will attempt to use the report to shirk their responsibility to clean up the workplace and to place blame for occupational disease on workers who smoke.

The labor movement recognizes that smoking is a major public health problem of concern to both smokers and non-smokers and that there are real issues related to smoking and the workplace that should be addressed.

It is well documented that employers' failure to control exposures to toxic substances in the workplace increases the risk of diseases for many workers. For workers exposed to some of these hazards, such as asbestos, there is evidence that smoking may further increase the risk of certain diseases. Our first priority is to limit exposures to toxic substances to reduce the risk of all exposed workers. We support programs to provide medical surveillance, education and counselling about the risks of disease to workers at high risk. Such programs should address the dangers of exposure to toxic substances and the added risk that may be posed by smoking, and provide assistance to those

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workers who wish to quit smoking. Many unions have already implemented these kinds of education and assistance programs.

We oppose employer discrimination against hiring of smokers and employer proposals to mandate the removal of smokers from certain jobs or to require participation in smoking cessation programs as an excuse not to meet their responsibility to clean up the workplace. Employers should not be allowed to shift the burden to individual workers.

Proposals to ban smoking in the workplace are also increasing. Unions are faced with legislation or unilaterally imposed employer policies that forbid smoking on the job and infringe on the rights of workers who smoke. Unions have a legal responsibility to represent the interests of all their members -- smokers and non-smokers. The AFL-CIO believes that issues related to smoking on the job can best be worked out voluntarily in individual workplaces between labor and management in a manner that protects the interests and rights of all workers and not by legislative mandate.

The AFL-CIO is committed to improving the working conditions and health of all our members. We urge our affiliated unions to continue their efforts to reduce workplace hazards and to provide voluntary assistance and education to workers who smoke as part of ongoing comprehensive programs to improve the health of union members.

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