

**"Ohio Union Group Sues Industry Over Health Costs [Trial Starts Monday]"
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Akron, Ohio--Health-care insurers for Ohio's labor unions are suing the tobacco industry for almost \$2 billion to cover the costs of treating smoking-related illnesses. The federal lawsuit claims tobacco companies targeted blue-collar workers and their children through advertising and promotional gimmicks that encouraged them to smoke. "We found documents that indicate that the tobacco industry was aware that people with lower incomes and less education, and who go to work right after high school, are more susceptible to the advertising--the Marlboro Man image, Joe Camel, etc.--and this is the most vulnerable group to purchase their tobacco products," said Mike Withey, an attorney from Seattle representing the plaintiffs.

The suit was brought by an Ohio group representing more than 100 labor union trust funds, which hold the money union members and their employers set aside for health insurance. The industry also discovered the health hazards of smoking through its research and kept that information from the public, according to the lawsuit, which goes to trial Monday in U.S. District Court.

Industry attorneys maintain there are no legal grounds for the lawsuit. Tobacco firms, like any other business, have a legal right to advertise, said Robert Weber, an attorney who represents R.J. Reynolds, one of the companies named in the suit. "What they're trying to say is that somehow Ohio working men and women don't somehow understand advertising and are more susceptible than other people in society--and that's just hogwash," he said. The lawsuit is one of more than 30 similar ones across the nation. Judges have thrown out such lawsuits in Florida and Pennsylvania. The plaintiffs dismissed Liggett Group from the lawsuit in exchange for its cooperation. Liggett executive Bennett Lebow is expected to provide insider testimony that the tobacco groups were trying to create doubts about the health issues ascribed to smoking. Another Liggett official, attorney Lawrence Meyer of Washington, D.C., is expected to testify that a project to develop a safer cigarette was squelched because of fear from other cigarette makers that it "was going to ruin the industry."