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Mismanaging Chemical Risks: EPA’s Failure to Protect Workers
House Energy and Commerce, Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee

Testimony of Jeaneen McGinnis, FCA-UAW Retiree

Thank you Chairman Tonko and Ranking Member Shimkus for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jeaneen McGinnis, I am a FCA-UAW retiree and Benefit Representative with UAW local 1413/1929. I live in Huntsville, Alabama.

I was hired as an assembly line worker at the Chrysler plant in Huntsville, Alabama in 1983. It was a profound point in my life, since I was entering the workforce for the first time and my husband had just served 7 years in the military. Married at a very young age, I was a busy stay at home mother until my daughter turned three years old. Now that my husband was out of the military, I needed to find a job to supplement the family income. I had not finished college and came to quickly realize that job opportunities were limited without a degree. I was overjoyed to have a job that was highly sought after in this area of the country where jobs were scarce. It offered decent wages and opportunity for growth - that I quickly took advantage of later in my career when I earned a degree in Human Resource Management.

Once known as the “fastest growing automotive electronics operation in North America,” our plant built AM/FM radios, air bags, odometers, speedometers, oil and gas gauges on the assembly line. When I started working there were approximately 2,400 workers but soon reached to over 2,800. I assembled the circuitry for the dashboard instruments including the speedometer, fuel gauge and check engine lights. The parts were used in PT cruisers and other high-end vehicles sold in the United States and abroad.

It was a fast-moving plant that had different lines and products built. We had to learn jobs quickly and cross trained to learn all the jobs in the plant. Our facility manufactured circuit boards using wave solder machines. Various electronic components were inserted into each circuit board and then it was passed across a wave of molten solder. Many of us became concerned because we were exposed to the paste and the fumes during the fabrication and assembly of the boards. The plant was poorly ventilated, we were breathing in the fumes on a daily basis and our skin was exposed to the various chemicals used in production. To make matters worse, gloves were not worn during soldering process. We received little training and were uninformed of the chemicals being used.

Our worries were justified. There was a baseball field adjacent to one of our buildings. They wouldn’t let the women play softball there anymore and closed the ball field after testing concluded that there was soil contamination. But we continued to work in the plant.

In the early 1990's, I moved to a newly built plant called Huntsville Electronic Division Chrysler (HEDC) in Madison, Alabama. It wasn't until we moved that the workers were provided with guidelines and hazardous postings. But many of us had already been exposed for many years prior to this. While there were improvements at the new plant, there was still inadequate ventilation, insufficient training on how to handle the chemicals and unfamiliarity with the chemicals we were using. There were 16 assembly lines in wide open space and big solder wave machine in the middle of the big plant. We were using our bare hands to take the solder paste out of the containers and running the circuit boards through the machines. We were just trying to get the job done and we weren't always thinking about how harmful the paste was.

I should also note that every solder line had a cleaning station. The agent used to clean the resin off the circuit boards was trichlorethylene (TCE). Chlorinated solvents like TCE were thought to be "safety solvents" because they would not catch fire. As workers, we didn't understand the possible health effects of these chemicals. They provided us with gloves but no training on how to safely handle the substances we were using. Now I know that we were exposed to chlorinated solvents including TCE. TCE is a known carcinogen.

In 2003, I moved off the assembly line and became a benefit representative with the UAW. The plants were sold and eventually closed. Now I work with the 2,000 retirees who suffer the effects of exposure at the plants. Once a month, I attend a luncheon with 90-130 retirees from the Huntsville plant. I am accustomed to showing up and not seeing the person that I sat next to from the previous lunch because they are no longer with us. Many retirees are angry and want to know why there appear to be high rates of deaths as a result of nervous system disorders and cancer. I encourage the retirees to go see their doctor, run tests to detect and treat health issues early. Researchers have studied my workplace. They found that my co-workers have died at a higher rate than the general population of diseases related to TCE and other chemical exposures in my workplace. These diseases include cancers of the brain and nervous system as well as non-cancer nervous system diseases.

A lot more could have been done to protect workers at the Huntsville Plant and lessen chemical risks. Companies need to be held accountable and more stringent legal requirements are needed to ensure that workers are not exposed to harmful chemicals. We need to go forward not backward to 1977. The Obama Administration proposed banning some uses of TCE. Sadly, the Trump Administration has not issued final rules for these bans.

As more businesses and auto manufacturing jobs move to my region, we will be faced with the same issues. It may be too late for many of our retirees. Chemicals should be tested *before* manufacturers are permitted to use them in the workplace. In 2016, President Obama signed the Lautenberg Act to fix the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). We can't afford to wait anymore. Implementation of the TSCA must be a top priority of the EPA and the Administration to protect our workplaces and communities from untested and toxic chemicals. Everyone should be able to go to work with the expectation that the workplace is free of health and safety hazards and that they can enjoy their golden years.

I look forward to responding to your questions. Thank you.