

# Union Action at Shop Floor and in Legislature Promote Safer Chemicals



The Right to Know about workplace chemical hazards is something that labor fought hard for and won in the early 1980's. But now, twenty years later, as chemicals are increasingly associated with an epidemic of chronic diseases, infertility and learning disabilities, workers and their unions need the Right to Know more of what they're exposed to – and the Right to Act on this information. MassCOSH, local unions and health and safety activists are taking leaps to achieve this – promoting the use of safer chemicals through legislation and workplace action.

In January, MassCOSH worked with the Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow to file legislation that would establish a program to replace ten widely used hazardous chemicals with safer alternatives. Sponsored by Senator Steve Tolman and Representative Jay Kaufman, the bill would bolster work that MassCOSH is doing to promote the replacement of these chemicals through union shop floor efforts.

"We use some of these chemicals at GE," Steve Gauthier from IUE/CWA Local 201 said. "We are now in discussion with management on how to change specs on several jobs to eliminate these chemicals."

A survey of 25 union locals, conducted in 2006 by MassCOSH, asked unions about five chemicals with which their members work and whether they would have an interest in learning more about

Many of the strategies labor currently has available to them can be used to promote safer alternatives to toxics.

- ▶ Identify common concerns about hazards (worker surveys, review chemical inventory, use your Right-to-Know and request the MSDs –Material Safety Data Sheets).
- ▶ Organize a union-only health and safety committee. Contact MassCOSH for health and safety support in non-union workplaces.
- ▶ Collaborate with MassCOSH to seek funding for joint projects on health, safety and toxics use reduction (see new MassCOSH Campaign Toolbox on our webpage)
- ▶ Negotiate contract language for: hazard awareness and annual training; declaration agreements on using safer alternatives for identified hazards, trigger clauses to negotiate union involvement in decisions about technology or work processes changes before they occur.
- ▶ Build community alliances to create "good neighbor" agreements about toxic hazards.

substituting hazardous chemicals with safer ones. While most expressed a strong interest in being involved with decisions about the chemicals they use, many responded that they lack information about chemical hazards.

In response to the survey, MassCOSH conducted presentations at labor councils around the state on a "Safer Alternatives Tool Box" and results from a recent study conducted by the state's Toxic Use Reduction Institute (TURI) on five widely used hazardous chemicals (see box below.)

"The TURI study shows that there is credible scientific evidence that these five chemicals are very dangerous to workers and consumers and should be replaced by safer substitutes," said Tolle Graham.

MassCOSH is now meeting with

union locals interested in applying this safer alternatives approach to expand your "tool box" of health and safety strategies.

"We do hazardous work and our plant is in a neighborhood in Fall River," said Olivo Mingola of USW Local 1357, which represents workers at Rodney metals. "The union health and safety reps at our plant have taken toxics use reduction really seriously. We are working to eliminate one of the furnaces that created hazards for our members as well as our neighbors." ■

*If your union local is interested in learning more about safer alternatives, call Tolle Graham at 617-825-7233 x19 or go to [www.masscosh.org](http://www.masscosh.org) to learn more about the Safer Alternatives Bill and to fill out our Safer Alternatives survey.*

## Five Chemicals Targeted in the State-funded Study

Chemical	Uses	Safer Alternatives
Perchloroethylene "Perc"	Dry cleaning Automotive aerosols (brake and engine cleaners) Vapor degreasing	Wet cleaning Liquid CO2 Water based cleaning
Formaldehyde	Adhesives/resins for particle board wood products Salon sanitizers School laboratory specimen fixation and preservation	Wood plywood panels Plastic wood composite UV sterilization chamber
DEHP	Medical devices: bag/sheet, tubing applications Resilient flooring Vinyl wall covering	Natural linoleum, Cork Polyolefin, Silicone
Lead	Heat stabilizers for PVC wire and cable coatings Auto wheel weights and fishing tackle Ammunition for shooting ranges	Zinc, Copper, Iron, Steel
Hexavalent Chromium	Decorative chrome electroplating Hard chrome electroplating Zinc galvanized steel	Zinc, Galvanized steel, passivation Trivalent chromium plating Heat Treatment and Plasma nitriding

For more information about the Five Chemicals Alternatives Assessment study go to [www.turi.org](http://www.turi.org)