

**CHINESE FIND JOBS ARE POISON;
FAMILIES MAY SUFFER TOO, BUT WORKERS FACE THREATS IF THEY
COMPLAIN TO BEIJING
BATTERY FACTORY CADMIUM**

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In a little less than a year, some 600 workers in two factories in southern China have been tainted with **cadmium**, a heavy metal that can cause severe body pain, nausea, uncontrolled urine flow, memory loss and liver failure.

Huizhou, barely an hour's drive from Hong Kong, is a hub of global battery production, and in today's global economy, the nickel-**cadmium** battery that powers a train set or race car under a Christmas tree in America might have come from a factory there.

One reason Chinese-made products are so inexpensive is that local officials allow factories to overlook occupational-safety laws. Factory workers sustain all kinds of injuries, then are cast off like the toys and sneakers they assemble. China has no independent labor unions, and its courts are easily influenced by local Communist Party officials.

In Huizhou, at least 37 workers were hospitalized for observation, some of them complaining of intense pain.

"My hair is falling out and my throat hurts," said Wei Xuexiu, a 33-year-old manager at one of the factories, who was on medical leave but not hospitalized.

"I often get headaches," said Yao Qunhuai, a fellow worker. "I feel that my memory is fading."

The two factories where they and the other employees tainted with **cadmium** worked are a division of Gold Peak Industries. Gold Peak batteries sell widely in Asia but have only a tiny share of the estimated \$10.7 billion U.S. battery market. Factory workers who spoke to Knight Ridder said the rechargeable nickel-**cadmium** batteries they made were mostly for toys. Similar batteries are used in laptop computers and cameras.

Gold Peak declined to specify which brands sold in U.S. stores contain its batteries. A Hong Kong public-relations specialist hired by the company, Paul Sham, said GP batteries generally were unbranded and were in toys and other devices.

Facts of poisoning in dispute

The factors that led to the occupational safety catastrophe at the two GP Battery factories are in dispute.

Workers and labor-rights advocates said factory owners were in cahoots with local officials and disregarded safety laws to keep costs down. Employees said they weren't told of the dangers of **cadmium** and initially were barred from wearing masks.

Ventilation is still poor, they said. Launching its own probe, the environmental group Greenpeace found that the factories were discharging **cadmium** into local drainage systems.

Gold Peak described the poisoning of workers as a onetime breakdown.

"Our top management is very sad and regrets to see this happen," Andrew Chuang, an executive director at Gold Peak Industries, said in a telephone interview from Hong Kong. "One of the most important things we want to do is ensure absolute safety for our workers."

Occupational ailments are common in China. In Guangdong province, known as the "world's workshop," most of the 18 million or so factory workers are poorly educated migrants from elsewhere in China who don't know much about the impact of chemicals, heavy metals and solvents.

They learn fast, though, once they begin to get sick.

"Read this information," said Yang Yinghua, a 24-year-old from Hunan province, holding up a photocopy of a medical text. "It says, '**Cadmium** is extracted from the body extremely slowly. It can take 10 to 30 years for **cadmium** to flush out of the kidneys.' "

Yang, like hundreds of other workers, found that her job at one of the GP Battery factories left her nauseated, with severe back pain and with **cadmium** lodged in her body.

Workers said the dusty powder they packed into rechargeable nickel-**cadmium**

batteries was sticky and turned their clothes red.

"It was extremely dirty in the factory, but we had no idea it was poisonous," said one worker, who still holds her job and spoke on condition of anonymity.

By late 2003, workers complained of ailments and demanded medical tests. When the first tests showed excessive levels of **cadmium**, a few employees were sent to the hospital. By June, many workers were beside themselves. They held a three-day strike, demanding blood and urine testing for the 2,700 employees at the two factories.

Some workers who paid for private blood tests said the results showed higher levels of **cadmium** than the company-sponsored tests did.

With a crisis unfolding, managers at the plants began asking ailing employees to accept lump-sum payments, sometimes as little as \$2,500, and forgo legal action.

Workers who accepted the payments spoke bitterly of the parting advice that factory managers gave them about coping with a possible lifetime disability.

"The factory told us we should drink more milk, eat more fruit, have more nutritious food," said Wei, the former midlevel manager.

Some employees paid to have their children tested and were shocked to find that they also had excessive **cadmium** levels.

"They offered me a buyout. I said, 'What about my daughter?' They said, 'We don't recognize the medical test for her,' " said one frightened worker, who added that she was never warned about working at the factory while pregnant.

China's labor law says workers are "entitled to know the dangerous elements" at their jobs and are empowered to make suggestions to improve safety.

But about a dozen employees interviewed from the two GP factories said they weren't told how to handle **cadmium** safely. They were barred from wearing masks right after the factory opened in 1994, then after a few years were allowed to wear only rudimentary paper masks.

City has conflict of interest

Under Chinese law, workplace inspectors are supposed to make regular checks, but GP Battery somehow escaped notice. The parent company, Gold Peak Holdings, and Huizhou's city government are business partners. Both hold major stakes in another huge local company, TCL, one of the world's biggest producers of television sets.

"So they have the same interests," said Au Loong-yu, a member of the editorial board of Globalization Monitor, a Hong Kong publication that's championed the cause of the battery factory workers. "The collusion between the GP management and the local officials is so outrageous."

The Huizhou city government declined repeated requests for comment on why safety

rules apparently weren't enforced at the factories.

On Sept. 3, Huizhou city officials and GP Battery issued a joint letter to workers warning that if they tried to take complaints to Beijing they might face legal charges. By early October, lawyer Zhou Litai sued GP Battery on behalf of 65 workers, claiming they weren't told of dangerous conditions.

GP Battery ceased producing nickel-**cadmium** batteries at the plants by early July, changing to other types of batteries. The firm says only two people have been diagnosed with "chronic occupational **cadmium** poisoning," while others are under observation.

Brenda Lee, deputy general manager at Gold Peak, brushed off concerns about those with lesser levels of **cadmium** poisoning.

"The levels of **cadmium** in the body will go down gradually," Lee said.

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