

Actions on the issue of Gold Peak and poison victims

Wednesday 20 September 2006, by [YEUNG Winnie](#), [YUNG Chester](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2006).

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Firm blamed for cadmium poisoning

Chester Yung

Hong Kong Standard

Sept. 14, 2006

A group of about 30 demonstrators, including two legislators, have stormed a shareholders' meeting in Central to draw attention to the lack of protection offered to workers at a battery factory, where at least 12 employees were confirmed to be suffering from cadmium poisoning.

They also called on the chairman and chief executive of Gold Peak Industrial Holdings, Victor Lo Chung-wing, to resign.

The action Wednesday came as shareholders of the Gold Peak Group were having a meeting at the Conrad hotel. The 30 demonstrators, which included unionist Lee Cheuk-yan and Long Hair'' Leung Kwok-hung, marched to the hotel and chanted slogans accusing the group of turning a blind eye to the health of workers, about 1,400 of whom are said to be in danger of cadmium poisoning. "The Gold Peak shareholders only care about how many shares they receive, but forget that the profit from these shares come from the blood, sweat and tears of workers," said Staphany Wong Ting-yuk, campaign coordinator of the Hong Kong liaison office of the international trade union movement. Wong said 12 workers were confirmed to be suffering from poisoning and about 1,400 were believed to have excess cadmium levels'' due to their prolonged exposure to the chemical at the GP plants.

GP Batteries began producing nickel cadmium batteries in China in the 1990s. It is 49 percent owned by the Singapore-listed GP Industries, which is an 87 percent subsidiary of Gold Peak Industries (Holdings).

In 2004 the company found through health checks that some workers at two Huizhou plants in southern China and one Shenzhen plant were exposed to excess cadmium levels.

Acute exposure to cadmium fumes may cause flu-like symptoms including chills, fever and muscle ache. More severe exposure can cause tracheo- bronchitis, pneumonitis and pulmonary edema.

Inhaling cadmium-laden dust quickly leads to respiratory tract and kidney problems which can be fatal.

"I have worked at the GP factory since I was a little girl. It's almost 10 years now and my health is deteriorating," 32-year-old Huizhou worker Lu Hai-fong told The Standard, adding that she had to work about 12 hours daily for a salary of 27.40 yuan (HK\$26.82) a day.

The protesters called on Lo to step down and for the company to pay affected workers adequate compensation.

In response, Gold Peak said in a statement that some accusations against the company were unfounded.

"Some former worker have already received compensation packages of up to 250,000 yuan which is above the legal requirement," the company statement said.

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Poison victims draw a blank with Gold Peak

Winnie Yeung

South China Morning Post

Sept. 9, 2006

Four workers who suffered cadmium poisoning after working for battery maker Gold Peak Industries yesterday failed again to meet their former employer.

The workers were seeking talks on compensation with Victor Lo Chung-wing, who is also an executive councillor.

The four are among at least 13 victims who suffered cadmium poisoning while working for the GP Batteries factory in Huizhou two years ago. More than 300 other workers were found to have high levels of cadmium in their bodies.

Gold Peak issued a one-off subsidy of between 3,000 and 8,000 yuan to the workers, saying they had voluntarily terminated their work contracts afterwards.

But the workers said the subsidy barely covered their medical fees of 10,000 yuan a year on average, adding that their former employer had verbally agreed to cover their long-term medical expenses.

Cadmium poisoning can be lethal as the metal is a carcinogen that can remain in the body for decades.

More than 300 of the workers filed claims to Huizhou courts for compensation of 250,000 yuan each,

but failed earlier this year.

The four workers, all women who spent more than 2,000 yuan each to travel to Hong Kong, arrived at the Gold Peak headquarters in Kwai Chung yesterday with 30 local protesters but were faced by a closed gate.

They demanded a meeting with Mr Lo, but were unable to see him. He refused to meet the workers in January and March.

Gold Peak issued a statement last night denouncing the protesters' actions, saying they had ignored the court ruling and the spirit of the rule of law by asking for further compensation.

May Wong Yuet-mei, representing the workers who staged yesterday's protest, said they would continue to try to meet Mr Lo but admitted they had never called Gold Peak's headquarters to try to make an appointment.

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