

Annie Keating
May 14, 1992
Center for Environmental Studies.

**HEALTH HAZARDS IN THE JEWELRY INDUSTRY IN RHODE ISLAND:
A STUDY OF WORKPLACE REFORM;**

ABSTRACT:

In this thesis, I wanted to focus on an issue that illustrates social struggles that surround environmental problems, in an effort to expand the concept of environmentalism to include not only the struggle for the "environment" at risk, but also for the people in these environments who are in danger. The jewelry industry in Rhode Island illustrates the type of environmental abuse intertwined with forms of social oppression and inequality that this thesis seeks to interrogate. Health and safety problems in the workplace threaten the lives of many workers, offering an important sight of struggle for those concerned with both environmental issues and social change.

This thesis focuses on the issue of worker awareness and involvement surrounding health hazards in the costume jewelry industry, the largest industry in Rhode Island. Through my research I wanted to find out just how involved the workers in the jewelry industry in this state are in the process of maintaining adequately healthful and safe working conditions, and to interrogate the existing barriers to this kind of involvement. I wanted to find out more from the workers themselves, and get a better sense of their perspective on occupational health issues. Two main questions evolved through my research;

- 1) Are workers in the Rhode Island jewelry industry aware of the health risks that directly threaten them?**
- 2) How does this awareness (or lack thereof) relate to the level of worker involvement in maintaining a reasonably safe and healthful workplace?**

The answers to these questions are complex and interwoven. Through much research and many interviews with jewelry workers themselves, it became clear that workers' lack of awareness of the health hazards they face and of their "rights" under OSHA (the Occupational Health and Safety Administration) limit the level of worker involvement in health and safety issues. The most significant barriers to worker involvement that emerged through this research are:

- 1) Workers lack of awareness of their "rights" under OSHA
- 2) Workers are not an integral part of OSHA's enforcement process
- 3) A lack of health hazard training and information distribution
- 4) A lack of unionization in the jewelry industry
- 5) A heightened fear of complaining in the jewelry industry: the job vs. health dichotomy

These barriers need to be broken down.

Workplace reform needs to involve workers more in the process of maintaining safe and healthful working conditions: OSHA badly needs help in enforcement, help that workers themselves could best provide.

Any successful strategy of workplace reform must challenge existing labour-management relations and give workers more control within the workplace.

This thesis advocates regulatory improvements and forms of worker involvement that would not replace but rather accompany existing regulation. If workers are to be more involved, as suggested, they need some tools. Examples of these tools and regulatory reforms are as follows:

--OSHA reforms that allow for greater worker participation in OSHA's enforcement process such mandating joint employer-employee health and safety committees (a component of the OSHA reform bill S1622 sponsored by Senator Kennedy that is still pending) and paying workers for time spent inspections.

--Better training (especially for those who do not speak English) and information distribution on Health hazards. This could come through improving the Hazard Communication Standard, targeting Mayor Cianci and those working on the Providence Plan and urging them to take the issue of health and safety training seriously in their discussions of employment and training reforms.

--The establishment of an occupational health resource center in this state, a center that the Rhode Island Commission on Occupational Disease claimed was vital to the health and safety of jewelry workers in Rhode Island. (Massachusetts, a neighboring state, has several clinics in place).

--Reform through coalition building: the need for environmental-labour alliances and more communication between OSHA and the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) as well as other environmental groups.