

The Truth about San Onofre from the Wife of a Licensed Nuclear Reactor Operator

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By Bethann Chambers

I'm writing this article because I believe the time has come for the public to know the truth about what really goes on inside the security gates at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. My husband, James Chambers, has worked at SONGS for 27 years, and has been a Southern California Edison employee for 25. James was in training to get his reactor operators license when we were married 21 years ago. James is a licensed nuclear reactor operator for Units 2 and 3. Licensed nuclear reactor operators are actually a very elite group of nuclear professionals; there are a finite number of individuals who have licenses to operate nuclear power plants in the United States and around the world. James worked in the operations department for 17 years before getting a position as an Operations Training Instructor. He has also worked in Nuclear Oversight, Emergency Planning, and had been working in the Nuclear Regulatory Affairs Licensing Department, before going on medical leave because of work induced health problems.

Here is a summary of SONGS issues:

- * Southern California Edison selected the wrong individuals to run units 2 & 3 right from the start.
- * These wrong individuals have been trying to run SONGS like a branch of the military for over 30 years.
- * A militaristic managerial style is pervasive throughout all the departments. "Shut up. Do your job, and don't complain!"
- * The management litmus test is if some methodology was used in the nuclear navy (back in the day) then it is good enough for San Onofre.
- * If a worker raises a concern to middle or senior management they are usually regarded as being a problem. The pervasive management attitude at SONGS is: "If you don't like the way we do things, then get lost! Take a hike to another nuke plant if you don't like the way we do things here."
- * Most senior managers can best be described as "Rough old dogs that are not going to learn any new tricks."
- * The 12 1/2 hour rotating work schedule from dayshift to graveyard shift for the operations department can best be described as: unhealthy, destabilizing, and unsafe.
- * SCE has consistently forced its employees to work an excessive amount of overtime. During refueling outages in the 1990's my husband routinely worked 75 hours per week which is 6 days of 12 1/2 hour shifts with one day off per week. This type of schedule is worked for months at a time. It is an established fact that worker fatigue is one of the leading causes of industrial accidents and poor performance; but SONGS management obviously does not care. The NRC actually had to create new worker fatigue laws to prevent nuclear workers from working an unsafe amount of overtime.
- * Management bullies its non-union SONGS workers to put in extra hours, but these extra hours

are for free and compensation is never provided. A class action lawsuit (Stannard vs. SCE) was recently settled quietly out of court. Employees were told that they could not enter any overtime on their time cards as "uncompensated" and they were never paid or given compensation time for any extra work they did. Workers who were members of the Emergency Response Organization remained on call and within 60 minutes of the plant for a week at a time without any compensation. SCE will now be paying all the participants of the lawsuit for their overtime work; something SCE should have done from the start.

* The pervasive management attitude at SONGS is if a worker is not willing to work 50 to 80 hours a week for 40 hours of pay they are not a team player nor a dedicated SONGS employee.

* Working an excessive amount of overtime, I believe, was a contributing factor in my husband developing a viral form of spinal meningitis in 1994. Poor ventilation in the unsanitary Control Room, and an unsanitary lunch room were probably the two primary factors which lead to his illness. There has always been a serious lack of concern at SONGS for the health and well-being of the men and women who work in the Operations department. Yet, the Operations department is the heart and brain of every nuclear generating station. If you don't have licensed operators that are fit for duty, you won't have a running nuclear power plant. That is the bottom line!

* Some of the doctors hired by SCE to work at the SONGS medical facility were not well received and were described by plant workers as incompetent.

* Supervisors and managers often become angry when workers call in sick and they are unable to hide their disdain for absent workers.

* SONGS is a poorly maintained facility. Cleanliness has never been SCE's priority. The plant itself is filthy, and full of dirt, trash, clutter, cigarette butts and unidentified tripping hazards. Other nuclear facilities, like the Quad Cities Nuclear Generating Station in Illinois, run by Exelon, looked like a hospital operating room in comparison to SONGS when my husband visited to help out with a performance assessment.

* SONGS workers can best be described as over-worked and under undue stress at all times because of poor management practices.

* Another pervasive attitude is that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is the enemy. The unwritten rule is that SONGS workers should never speak to the NRC. This goes hand in hand with the militaristic management style. The NRC is the enemy and everyone needs to make personal sacrifices so that SONGS can continue to run without interference from the government. Filing an allegation with the NRC is considered to be "career suicide" by many SONGS workers.

* Workers are often denied their vacation benefits or pressured to never use any of their vacation time. The pervasive management attitude is that working at SONGS is more important than a workers marriage, children, or social life. The attitude is that the SONGS worker doesn't need any relaxation time; they need to be focused on work 24 hours a day and willing to come to work at a moments notice.

* The news media is also the enemy. The unwritten rule is that SONGS workers should not speak to the press or they will be jeopardizing their job. Employees are routinely directed not to share any information with the public because the plant has the worst INPO rating possible and many fear for their personal safety. If a nuclear power plant is poorly rated it means the staff is not competent in operating the facility.

* In the Operations department, individuals must have a reactor operator's license before they can work in the Control Room or hold certain senior positions, but in other non-union

supporting departments there are no legal requirements for holding a management position. In these supporting departments at SONGS there are many completely unqualified managers. It seems like the only thing a person needs to do to become a manager is to be the hiring director's good buddy, or a good looking woman. Qualified individuals are often passed up for promotions and pay raises while completely incompetent individuals become managers and department directors. This is a well known practice at SONGS. There are numerous dead-wood managers and directors that no one knows what they do or why they were given their jobs. SONGS has a workforce twice the size of similar nuclear generating stations but is the poorest rated in the nation.

* There are many senior managers who are very knowledgeable about nuclear power generation but they lack the social and interpersonal relationship skills to run their departments successfully. In other words, these managers are social imbeciles who cannot say: hello, good night, or thank you for doing a good job. They treat people like machines. The thing that is so ironic is that even the worker who is socially challenged themselves does not want to work for another socially challenged supervisor because they don't like being ignored and treated poorly either.

* There is a three tiered society at SONGS. On the top tier is the Good Old Boys Club which includes very few women. The GOB's are the senior management at SONGS. The Good Old Boys will usually cover each others backs in every situation. Rarely will one Good Old Boy throw another GOB under the bus. On the second tier are the Company Stooges. The Company Stooges want to be in the Good Old Boys Club, so they will do anything they are told to do including lie for a Good Old Boy. There is an obvious and serious lack of integrity among GOB's and Company Stooges. On the bottom tier are the Worker Bees. The Worker Bees are blamed for everything wrong at the plant. The Worker Bees are generally looked down upon by the Company Stooges and the Good Old Boys as being the lowest form of life at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station. If a Worker Bee has a concern or a problem the GOB's and the Company Stooges just blow off or ignore everything a Worker Bee says. Any formal complaints that a Worker Bee might file are usually just swept under the rug and denied. This tendency to ignore worker concerns has lead to a ten-fold increase in allegations filed with the NRC. SCE historically has never corrected any problems until an outside government agency fines the company or requires them by law to correct their work place violations.

* The culture at SONGS is sick; this is the best word to describe the toxic work environment at the plant.

* Senior management at SONGS is in complete denial. They refuse to acknowledge that bad management practices have caused the ongoing downward performance spiral. SONGS is rated an INPO 4 plant and the worst run nuclear power plant in the country. SONGS has consistently been ranked as one of the lowest performers in the area of Industrial safety for over 5 years.

* Many good employees have already left SONGS because they will not put up with the insanity that goes on at San Onofre.

* SONGS received a "Chilling Effects" letter from the NRC in March of this year because SONGS management has made everyone afraid of raising concerns for fear of being retaliated against. If the workers at the nuclear power plant are afraid to raise concerns then the health and safety of the public is in jeopardy!

* It is my sincere recommendation that the NRC should shut down SONGS (order SCE to place both units in Mode 6) before someone is seriously injured or a disgruntled worker does something to sabotage the plant. I believe that the toxic work environment has reached a boiling point, and SCE will not be able to correct any of its Safety Conscious Work Environment problems or Human Performance Cross-Cutting issues until a shutdown occurs.

I believe that there needs to be much more public scrutiny of Southern California Edison's management of the plant. For 21 years I have silently stood by my husband, and kissed him good-bye in the morning or afternoon only to see him return home looking half dead, mentally and physically beaten into the ground, after a day or night of working at SONGS. I made a decision, though, following the September 16, 2010 public meeting in Dana Point that I was no longer going to remain silent. What is going on at SONGS is a travesty, and an outrage that needs to end immediately. The only thing my husband has ever wanted was to be able to go to work, do his job to the best of his ability, and be treated fairly by his supervisors and co-workers. That's it!

The four top managers at the September public meeting: Bauder, Sheppard, McCool, and O'Meara sounded like nuclear politicians and everything they said about how they are going to correct their SCWE problem were nothing but fabrications to appease the NRC. It is so ironic that SONGS has always placed people with characteristically poor social skills in charge of departments that have been designated to correct their "social" problems. Upon the recommendation of the NRC, my husband went through hours of mediation with a Cornell University mediator, an SCE corporate lawyer and the SONGS Station Manager: Mr. Al Hochevar. The corporate representative and Mr. Hochevar refused to do anything viable to resolve the retaliation my husband received from his supervisor. And what is worse is that the SCE representatives are either completely ignorant of federal whistleblower regulations concerning protected speech or they were doing a very good job playing dumb. There is no evidence that SONGS management has any inclination to correct any of its Cross-Cutting or Safety Conscience Work Environment issues.

Let me clarify that I am not writing this just because I'm angry and want justice for my own husband. No, I'm angry and I want justice for every mistreated, maligned and wrongly terminated worker at SONGS. After my husband spoke at the September public meeting, the chatter at the plant was that he had "come down hard on the company." Let me clarify that James Chambers did not come down hard on the company. He spoke the truth; there is a difference between being unfairly critical and being transparent about how things really are.

Here's where the rubber hits the road, folks. Senior management at SONGS will never admit that any worker has been retaliated against, bullied, wrongly terminated, nor will they ever discipline any of their bad managers because if they do it will be an admission of guilt and an instant employment lawsuit. So they just keep denying everything in the hopes that the truth will get lost in the shuffle and no one will really know what actually happens at SONGS. SONGS management acts like they don't know why the plant has received an INPO 4 rating or why the NRC has a record number of inspectors at the plant to investigate all the problems. I can tell you exactly what the biggest problem is: It is the lack of honesty! I don't have any problem saying that Southern California Edison aka Edison International (EIX) is a corrupt and immoral corporation. One of the rumors being whispered among workers is that SCE truly does not care about the problems at SONGS; because from a corporate taxes and profit perspective it's better for the company that SONGS is a huge money pit. You see, SCE does not make money by running SONGS in a cost efficient manner; they make money from capital investment. So if SCE has to spend several hundred million dollars on equipment, labor, contractors, advisors and corporate re-education programs it actually ends up being to the company's benefit from a taxes and profit perspective. What is going on at SONGS is really a classic example of a corrupt corporation putting profits ahead of the health and safety of their workers and the public. This is the question that every southern California resident needs to ask themselves: Is this the kind of public utility we want running our primary power source for the region? Let your voice be heard at the next NRC public meeting.