

## **Working Neglect**

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by Mary Vivenzi

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### **Work is Dangerous to Our Health**

In this country's occupational environmental, destruction, pestilence, and death are factored into production the same as casualties of war are factored into military battles.

Industrial speed up, longer working hours, and old faulty equipment, due to company neglect, result into fatal accidents.

But occupational environment, the workplaces, have become "killing fields." In addition to millions broken limbs and deaths from falls etc., in the United States alone, at least 400,000 workers get occupational diseases (cancer, etc.) and at least 60,000 workers die each year from these diseases. In fact, some estimates are higher! Blue-collar workers and agricultural workers all have higher rates of cancer and other diseases because they receive higher doses of the toxic chemicals at the workplace than the rest of the population. Eventually, these toxins spread to the entire working class as they become part of the environment. Scientific technology exists to prevent the high rate of occupational diseases, but the drive for profits and capitalist competition prevent the implementation of preventive action and proper safety precautions.

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Today's global market economy is exacting a heavy toll. Working families are paying the highest price. In the 1990's, when Dr. Peter Infante of the head of Standards of the U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), he observed that Blue-collar workers are suffering the greatest cancer risk and are being treated like test subjects for the effects of industrial chemicals. He called blue-collar workers the canaries of our society. Just as dying canaries warned miners of the first sign of toxic gas below, workers help warn us of carcinogens and other toxins in our communities environment. But blue-collar workers are joined by the likes of office workers, cosmetologists and pharmaceutical workers to name a few, who are also suffering the effects of hazardous exposures. The government and the employers have ignored his warning.

As Infante suggests and our collective experiences tell us things are out of balance as well. Weather patterns are increasingly erratic and extreme. Ecosystems are threatened. Entire plant and wildlife species are disappearing at an alarming rate. Further, the weight of evidence demonstrates we are the most poisoned of generations. The toxic burden in our bodies has reached unacceptable levels.

Sandra Steingraber in her book *Living Downstream* tells us for instance, in a 1976 sampling of breast milk in American women one of every four samples contained polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at concentrations above the legal limit and which if sold for commercial use would be pulled from the shelves.

Those who live in proximity to industry, hazardous waste sites and radiation producers military and civilian are also contracting cancer at rates far exceeding the general

population. In workplaces we are witnessing a deterioration of occupational health and safety laws and environmental laws.

At the same time as the laws are being weakened, cancer researchers estimate occupational exposures account for 20 to 40 per cent of all cancers, while the World Health Organization attributes 70 to 90 per cent of cancers to environmental causes. In 1930 one in 10 died from cancer. Today it is closer to one in three.

But cancer is not a disease of old age. It is the leading cause of death for men aged 45 to 65 and women aged 35 to 69. Childhood cancer has also increased by 30 per cent since the 1950's. More health experts predict that the incidence of new cancer cases will increase 70 per cent by 2010.

**So cancer isn't just a worker issue, it is a major public health scandal.**

We need not give into despair though. Ours is also a story of hope. Trade union health and safety activists should form new alliances with environmentalists, indigenous peoples, educators, enlightened entrepreneurs, governments, faith communities and many others in our communities as a whole. We are determined to reclaim our children's birthright. We envision hazard-free workplaces that eliminate worker injury, illness and death, and in the doing promote the health of workers, their families, fellow citizens and the earth which sustains us all. This is our hope for the world. It will be attained when we recognize the peril we face, the power we hold and the lifelong necessity of working together for our vision. To this end, we are promoting "green jobs" jobs that result in healthier working and living environments for all.