Poisoning for profit: Book exposes US corporate cover-up of toxic pollution

Part 2

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The is the concluding part of a two-part review of Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution, *by Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner (University of California Press, 2002). The* first part *was posted on February 2.*

The second part of *Deceit and Denial* examines pollution by the chemical industry, which during the second half of the twentieth century exploded on the industrial scene. In the 1940s and 1950s, the chemical industry promoted petrochemical products, particularly plastics, as essential to modern American society. The industry mesmerized consumers with technological advances. The position of the Manufacturing Chemists' Association (MCA), the major trade association for the industry, was that "public health could not be the paramount concern of the industry. The economic interests of the chemical industry were synonymous with the interests of the country."

Plastics had emerged in the 1950s as the backbone of the petrochemical industry. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC), the most common plastic, was created from chemical combinations that did not exist in nature, so its effects on the environment and human health were completely unknown.

Whatever standards were established for workers' exposure because of industry worries about liability, they were arbitrary and usually resulted from deals between industry leaders and public health officials.

The publication of books like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* led to greater public awareness of pollution in the 1960s. Many hygienists began to think that there was no threshold level for carcinogens. Carcinogens "triggered" a biological process, and it was theoretically possible for a single exposure to begin the chain of biological events leading to cancer. The chemical industry's response was to make sure that studies demonstrating health dangers were not made public.

In the mid-1960s, vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), a primary component of polyvinyl chloride, was linked to acroosteolysis, a degenerative bone condition affecting workers in several plants. The chemical industry developed a plan it used frequently in the coming decades. It would privately fund research to provide the information it needed to devise a response. The industry then released only information that would reassure people of the safe nature of its products, and worked to stop any government regulation.

In the 1970s, the MCA received news that studies done for European chemical manufacturers showed cancers at low levels of VCM exposure. The US industry realized that if it became known that vinyl chloride—the basis of plastic wrap, hairsprays, floor coverings, and hundreds of other consumer products—was linked to cancer, the public might view all plastics as threatening to health.

As more data emerged from European investigators, the US chemical industry deceived the government and misled the public in order to hide the link between plastic and its health dangers.

An Italian researcher, Dr. Viola of the Regina Elena Institute for Cancer Research in Rome, reported that rats exposed to 30,000 parts per million (ppm) of vinyl chloride monomer gas developed cancer of the skin, lungs and bones.

Another Italian researcher, Cesare Maltoni, confirmed in 1972 that cancers were appearing in rats exposed to much lower levels of vinyl chloride than in Viola's studies—as low as 250 ppm—and the cancers were appearing in more locations in the rats' bodies, including liver and kidneys. (At this time in the US, beauticians spraying customers' hair for three minutes using a vinyl chloride monomer aerosol propellant saturated the air they breathed with 1,400 ppm of the carcinogen, nearly six times the level sufficient to produce cancer.) These results were reported to American producers of PVC and VCM at a confidential meeting at MCA headquarters in Washington, D.C.

The European and American chemical companies immediately drafted a secrecy agreement stating, "the members of our task group as listed on the attached sheet, are the *only* ones entitled to receive information about the European project." In the US, Dow Chemical ordered that no one "discuss the European work," even within the company. Protecting industry from suits by users of vinyl chloride products and avoiding financial loss if consumers stopped buying their goods was foremost for industry.

In 1973, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) learned that plastic liquor and wine bottles were leaching vinyl chloride into the liquor and wine, and ultimately banned its use for liquor bottles. An industry study found that vinyl chloride residues from bottles and packages had migrated into vinegar, apple cider, vegetable oil, mineral oil and meats.

That same year, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) published a "Request for Information" on the potential hazards of vinyl chloride. To maintain its relationship with the government agencies, the industry would need to give NIOSH information about Maltoni's research. As Dow's vice president said, "It would be extremely damaging to the chemical industry's reputation if someone should discover that we have this information and have not disclosed it to the Government."

On the other hand, the US chemical industry had signed the secrecy agreement with its European counterparts. The MCA devised a plan that would maintain the secrecy agreement while making it appear that the industry was responding to NIOSH's request for information. MCA lawyers told the trade group's representatives they shouldn't volunteer information on the European projects, but if asked a direct question, they could respond truthfully. This was not expected because NIOSH did not know of the European experiments. Further, the companies would not volunteer information on hazards to consumers, since NIOSH was concerned with employee health, not public health.

At the meeting, no mention was made of Maltoni or of kidney and liver

cancers. According to notes taken by the NIOSH representative, although the industry told of Viola finding cancers at 30,000 ppm, no one mentioned tumors at 250 ppm.

Studies in the mid-1970s showed workers exposed to vinyl chloride suffered an excessive number of cancer deaths from cancer of the liver, lung, lymphatic and central nervous systems, including brain tumors. However, VCM is also a potential danger to consumers. After polyvinyl chloride is produced, vinyl chloride gas is trapped in the finished product and can escape. When burned, PVC produces hazardous fumes. Other studies in 1974-75 documented that vinyl chloride may be mutagenic (producing genetic mutations, a cause of birth defects) as well as carcinogenic.

The toxic effects of plastics production are far-reaching, as communities neighboring the plants suffer increasing cancer, birth defects and other documented conditions as vinyl feedstock leaks and fills the water, air and soil.

In one Louisiana community, by the late 1960s, "chemical plants had dumped so much noxious wastes there that fires began to erupt. In 1969, the levee broke and 'hundreds of thousands of contaminants [were] spilled...into the Mississippi River.' The trees died, the birds disappeared and the fish developed tumors. Residents started complaining to the state about their own physical ailments; some could barely work in the soil of their own back yards because toxic chemicals burned their eyes and skin. Others experienced chronic headaches, bloody noses and skin rashes" (p. 269).

As in so many such cases, state officials acknowledged that the residents had been exposed to the chemicals and that they were suffering from health complaints, but they refused to concede that there was any connection between the two. The causal relationship remained unproven, they claimed.

Markowitz and Rosner make a powerful summation of their argument that the lead and vinyl chloride industries were not aberrations, but typical of American business. It is worth quoting an extract:

"The question is this: How representative are lead and vinyl of general corporate behavior? Some would argue these are rogue industries, atypical of the general business culture. But this itself would be an article of faith, not fact, since neither the public nor the academic community has the opportunity to review the internal histories of most other American corporations. At the present time industries are not required to make internal corporate or trade association documents available to the public. These documents, which help the public understand what information industry possessed on particular toxins and what actions industry took in regard to those toxins, generally enter the public record by way of lawsuits. In the case of lead, lawsuits by lead-poisoned children, states, and municipalities against the lead industry have made such documents available. In the case of vinyl, lawsuits by poisoned workers against some of the largest chemical and petrochemical companies in the world have led to the discovery of documents that show lying, manipulation of government officials, and secrecy as tools used by industry to protect its product. As with asbestos and tobacco, the lead and vinyl industries knew of dangers from their products but chose to ignore or conceal them. In fact, they actively deceived the public about the safety of their products. While we may not yet know the actions of all industries with regard to industrial toxins, by now we do know that at least four or more major industries engaged in very similar activities to keep information from the public and to prevent regulation of products that they knew to be dangerous" (pp. 300-301).

The authors draw definite conclusions about what measures should be taken to deal with the phenomenon of poisoning for profit. They argue: "[W]hen it comes to public health, the society has a right to insist that the community's interests come before the shareholders' profits. It is not enough for industry to tout the benefits of its products; it must also inform people of their potential dangers. This is not a radical proposal" (p. 305).

Despite this understated and moderate language, however, Markowitz and Rosner give themselves far too little credit. In fact, this is very radical proposal, which, if carried out in practice, would expose the vast majority of corporate executives as criminals and would arouse the public to demand a complete transformation of the industrial system in the United States. It is worth noting that the demand to "open the books" of the major corporations has been a staple of the socialist movement, for the purpose of exposing not only their financial swindling but also the deliberate disregard of human welfare, of both workers and consumers.

The authors advocate the adoption of the "precautionary principle," effectively shifting the burden of proof in the introduction of new chemical and industrial substances. Nothing should be put in general circulation until there is positive proof that it is not a danger to public health. This is a perfectly reasonable, rational and rather modest proposal, which, under the current political circumstances, sounds almost revolutionary. (Markowitz and Rosner note at one point that the Bush administration's secretary of the interior, Gale Norton, is a former lobbyist for NL Industries, the current name for the company once known as National Lead.)

How is putting public health ahead of corporate profits to be achieved? What is the political means to carry this out? On this, the authors are virtually silent. Full disclosure of potential health hazards is, of course, necessary. But this is a political goal that requires a political struggle against corporate America's grip on the government, the media and the whole of social life.

Here the prescriptions of Markowitz and Rosner fall far short. They cite approvingly the proliferation of anti-corporate lawsuits and pressure campaigns by community groups and trade unions. They celebrate the role of the chemical workers' union in struggle with BASF in Louisiana, as well as environmental groups such as Greenpeace. They mention favorably the Seattle anti-globalization demonstration of November 1999 and similar protests.

In several places, the authors note that corporate domination threatens democracy. They document 100 years of corporate lying, as well as manipulating and suppressing information, in which the government, the political parties, the media and the academic research community are all subordinated to big business.

Clearly, this is not a matter of bad individuals or even bad periods in the history of American capitalism. We are dealing with a phenomenon that is intrinsic to the nature of the profit system. In the final analysis, if social needs—such as the right not to be poisoned—are to take precedence over profits, then the public must assert democratic control over the basic functioning of modern industry.

Deceit and Denial is a powerful exposure of corporate criminality. While its authors do not draw such conclusions—from their own political limitations or perhaps out of concern for what they imagine to be realistic—it makes a sufficient case, on public health grounds alone, for the nationalization of basic industries and their operation as part of a socialist planned economy.

Concluded