

A national disgrace: sick 9/11 workers left without medical coverage

70 percent with respiratory ailments

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Thousands of rescue and recovery workers who responded to the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Center are now suffering from chronic, debilitating and potentially life-threatening illnesses.

The report issued September 6 by Mount Sinai Medical Center substantiating this fact points to a staggering health care crisis.

The way these workers have been treated is nothing short of a national disgrace, implicating every level of government, the entire political establishment and the profit system itself. A government that has shamelessly exploited the events of 9/11 to promote criminal policies ranging from wars of aggression abroad to the destruction of democratic rights at home has largely turned its back on them, leaving thousands without medical coverage.

The Mount Sinai study found that some 70 percent of the 10,000 workers whose health it had monitored between 2002 and 2004 suffered new or substantially worsened respiratory problems while working on "the pile," as the World Trade Center site became known. More than 60 percent remained ill long after the site was cleared. Fully a third of these workers have diminished lung capacity. Many suffer from chronic illnesses that are only expected to worsen over time.

"There should no longer be any doubt about the health effects of the World Trade Center disaster," said Dr. Robin Herbert, co-director of Mount Sinai's World Trade Center program. "Our patients are sick, and they will need ongoing care for the rest of their lives."

"Sadder still," she added, "we continue each year to see new patients in the medical monitoring program who have either never been treated for their WTC illnesses, or who have received delayed or sub-optimal treatment."

Those affected are among the 40,000 workers who poured into the site after the Twin Towers were struck on September 11, claiming more than 2,500 lives. They included emergency responders—firefighters, cops and paramedics—who sought to rescue people from the buildings before they fell. They then participated in the desperate but largely fruitless effort to find survivors—and the grim task of recovering remains. Other public employees—transit workers, sanitation workers, etc.—joined in the effort, and many thousands of building trades, utility, telephone and other workers participated in the massive job of removing millions of tons of debris from the ruins of the demolished

skyscrapers and restoring essential services.

Many worked until they dropped from exhaustion, breathing in an atmosphere that was a toxic soup of concrete dust, pulverized glass, asbestos, poisonous chemicals and smoke. In the initial days, most were not provided with respirators. Later, many did not wear the devices, and no agency—federal, state or city—took it upon itself to enforce their use.

Environmental Health Perspectives, the journal that published the Mount Sinai study, noted in 2004 that the destruction of the World Trade Center unleashed "the largest acute environmental disaster that ever has befallen New York City."

At least half a dozen workers are known to have already died as a result of severe illnesses that resulted from their exposure to this disaster.

Many thousands of others have been left disabled, forced to quit their jobs. In the New York City Fire Department, which has conducted the most thorough monitoring of any group of workers, some 700 have been forced into early retirement because of disabling respiratory illnesses, while more than 3,400 fire fighters and emergency medical workers—fully 25 percent of the workforce—suffer from lung-related conditions.

Many are afflicted with the "trade center cough," a chronic and debilitating hacking that is in many cases a symptom of asthma, bronchitis and the scarring of lung tissue that are the results of prolonged exposure to the toxic cloud that hovered over the fallen towers.

Inevitably, even more severe problems remain ahead for many of these workers. Cancers caused by exposure to asbestos and toxic chemicals that permeated the atmosphere in the wake of the 9/11 attacks take anywhere from 5 to more than 20 years to manifest themselves. Benzene, which was released by burning jet fuel and plastic at the World Trade Center site, causes leukemia, which can occur as early as four or five years after exposure.

Among the more shocking statistics released in the Mount Sinai report is the fact that 40 percent of those screened have no medical insurance and are therefore unable to afford even minimal care. No doubt, this figure is even higher among the total number suffering illnesses as a result of their work at the site, given that many undocumented immigrant workers were contracted in the weeks after 9/11 to clean up contaminated buildings and offices, with contractors paying little or no attention to health and safety issues.

Also, the study does not cover thousands more people who were affected by the environmental disaster as a result of their living or working in lower Manhattan in the weeks and months after the terrorist attacks. However, there are ample indications that this population has suffered as well. One study, for example, uncovered a substantially elevated rate of low birth-weights and premature deliveries among pregnant women who lived or worked near the trade center site.

From the outset, government officials exhibited criminal indifference to the environmental effects of the disaster on workers and residents alike. Their principal concern was to contain costs and get Wall Street up and running as quickly as possible in order to minimize profit losses for America's corporations and super-rich.

To achieve this goal, they deliberately deceived the public. Documents released this week make clear that both city and federal agencies were aware of the toxic threat, even as they told the public and workers alike that there was no danger.

"In addition to standard construction/demolition site safety concerns, this site also poses threats to workers related to potential exposure to hazardous substances," read an October 5, 2001, letter from the US Environmental Protection Agency to the city's Health Department.

A day later, a memo from an official in the Health Department stated that the city's Department of Environmental Protection "believes the air quality is not yet suitable for re-occupancy" in the cordoned-off blocks surrounding the site. Nonetheless, she added, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—who has since made millions by cashing in on 9/11 fame—was ordering them reopened because of pressure from businesses and building owners.

These documents were pried loose by the Environmental Justice Project under a Freedom of Information Act request.

Just weeks before the EPA letter was written, then-agency head Christie Whitman issued a statement claiming that those working and living in proximity to the trade center site were "not being exposed to excessive levels of asbestos or other harmful substances," and that "their air is safe to breathe." In another statement she insisted, "There is no reason for concern."

For his part, Giuliani declared on September 28, 2001, "Although they occasionally will have an isolated reading with an unacceptable level of asbestos...it's very occasional and very isolated. The air quality is safe and acceptable."

Now, each is pointing the finger of blame at the other. In a "60 Minutes" television interview to be broadcast Sunday, Whitman blamed the city for failing to enforce use of respirators at the site.

Giuliani's former deputy mayor Joe Lhota responded by declaring, "The EPA publicly reported that air quality was safe and the city repeatedly instructed workers on the pile to use their respirators."

The same combination of negligence and duplicity has characterized the response of every level of government to the mushrooming health disaster since.

The federal government sought to paper over the problem by naming Dr. John Howard, head of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, as its 9/11 health coordinator—without providing an additional cent in funding for

this task nor a single full-time staff member.

Howard has been candid about the shameful inadequacy of the government's response. Of the meager \$52 million in federal funds allocated for treatment, he commented, "You don't have to go to cancers years from now, or asbestosis, to be able to say, 'Gee, John, how far do you think this money is going to go?' I don't think it will go very far."

The city, meanwhile, failed for nearly five years to even issue official physician guidelines for diagnosis of 9/11 illnesses, and has zealously contested attempts by city employees suffering disabling illnesses from securing "line-of-duty" pensions given to those forced out by on-the-job injuries.

No agency has conducted a thorough scientific study of the environmental impact of the Trade Center disaster. As with other aspects of 9/11, it is apparently believed that the facts are better left unknown.

Speaking at a City Hall press conference on the day the Mount Sinai study was released, New York City's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg still tried to deny the obvious. "I don't believe that you can say specifically a particular problem came from this particular event," he stated.

Bloomberg's overriding concern is clearly that the city not be held financially liable. While his administration has sought to hand billions of dollars in tax revenues to private developers seeking to build sports stadiums and other projects, it wants to limit as much as possible the amount it is forced to pay to save workers' lives. It is presently fighting a lawsuit brought in Manhattan federal court on behalf of 8,000 trade center responders charging the city with reckless disregard for workers' health.

In the final analysis, the disgraceful treatment of those who lost their health in the rescue and recovery effort is emblematic of the contempt and indifference that America's ruling elite and its government exhibit toward the deep-going social problems confronting the American working class as a whole.

More than 46 million Americans lack any health insurance. Workers injured on the job are routinely subjected to humiliation and rejection in their attempts to secure workers compensation, while corporate interests protest that any such benefits are an unacceptable impediment to profit.

The case of the World Trade Center responders stands out because of the undeniable heroism of those who worked there and the grotesque hypocrisy that has characterized the attempts to exploit this heroism for the most reactionary political purposes.

The demand that billions be allocated to monitor and treat all those who have suffered illnesses as a result of their work at "Ground Zero" must be joined with the fight for universal, comprehensive and publicly funded health care for all.



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