

Former EPA head defends US government lies about post-9/11 safety conditions

Sandy English
29 June 2007

Christine Todd Whitman, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) during the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, told a Congressional panel on Monday that she stood by the claims that she made shortly after that the attack that the area's "air was safe to breathe."

Whitman, the former governor of New Jersey, is now infamous for her September 18, 2001 statement that EPA tests showed that air and drinking water near the World Trade Center disaster site bore "little risk to rescue workers or the public." Nearly six years later, thousands of these workers and city residents are sick, and some have died.

Rescue workers and members of their families in the audience at the House hearing booed Whitman as she attempted to cover up for the lies and misinformation about health conditions at Ground Zero propagated by the Bush Administration.

A number of studies have demonstrated that the poisonous mixture of dust, glass, asbestos and the fumes of airplane fuel, have been responsible for restricted breathing, the scarring of lung tissue and other respiratory ailments in those exposed to the air of lower Manhattan in the aftermath of the attacks.

There is common agreement among health experts that this population will experience elevated levels of cancer in the coming years.

The reassuring statements about air and water quality made by the EPA and city politicians, including then-Mayor and current Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani, have had a direct impact on the health of thousands of rescue and recovery workers.

These statements were not simply the product of ignorance but were full-blown lies in what amounted to a conspiracy against the health of thousands of workers and local residents.

A report issued in 2003 by the EPA's Inspector General indicated that EPA officials in the days following the attack were encouraged to issue public reassurances that the air was safe.

The report revealed that Whitman had sent out a memo to agency officials requiring that "all statements to the media should be cleared with the NSC [National Security Council] before they are released."

Together with members of the White House's Council on Environmental Quality, NSC operatives rewrote the agency's statements to give the public a false sense of safety (see "Bush lied to NYC on post-9/11 pollution crisis").

The 2003 report concluded: "When the EPA made a[n] announcement that the air was 'safe' to breathe, it did not have sufficient data and analyses to make such a blanket statement."

The Bush administration and city officials were clearly in a hurry to get the area, which includes the nerve center of international finance capital, with Wall Street only a few blocks away, functioning normally. Among Bush's principal concerns was that the stock market reopen by September 14.

The Congressional panel investigating these lies is the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties, chaired by Democratic Congressman Jerrold Nadler, who represents the district that included the World Trade Center. Its stated aim is to determine if the Bush administration violated the rights of rescue workers and residents to due process by withholding health and safety information.

Nadler charged the administration with having made "false, misleading, and inaccurate statements, and refused to take remedial actions, even in the face of overwhelming evidence."

Whitman responded by calling these charges "misinformation, innuendo and outright falsehoods."

Other Bush administration officials testifying before the subcommittee dissembled and denied responsibility for the misinformation.

Samuel Thernstrom, director of communications for the White House Council on Environmental Quality at the time (now with the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute), admitted that the White House had changed the EPA's press releases, but claimed, "When we revised

EPA's drafts to make them more reassuring, I believed they reflected the EPA's views too."

Thernstrom observed that the September 11 Commission, notorious for its own misinformation and omissions, had found "my role was proper" and that "I did not influence Whitman's decision to declare the air 'safe'."

Not appearing at the witness table was former mayor Giuliani, who exercised direct control over the rescue and recovery operation at Ground Zero and has since traded on a media-generated reputation stemming from this role to amass a multi-million-dollar fortune and become a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination.

On the eve of her appearance before the panel, Whitman gave an interview to the New York affiliate of NBC News, charging that Giuliani had blocked efforts by the EPA to compel workers at the site to wear respirators.

"Every day, there would be telephone calls, telephone meetings and meetings in person ... with the city when we repeated the message of the necessity of wearing respirators," she said. She also pointed out that at the Pentagon, also struck on September 11, workers were not allowed on the site unless they were wearing the safety devices.

Whitman suggested that Giuliani was more concerned with the image of his administration than worker safety. She noted that city officials had sought to prevent EPA workers from coming onto the site in haz-mat suits, because they "didn't want this image of a city falling apart."

Asked directly if she believed that workers are sick and dying today because of the Giuliani administration's failure to enforce safety regulations, Whitman replied, "I'm not a scientist ... but I do. I mean, we wouldn't have been saying that the workers should wear respirators if ... we didn't think there might be health consequences."

A spokesman for Giuliani fired back with an angry reply, calling Whitman's comments "baseless" and "revisionist at best." The sharp exchange reflected fears within the camp of the ex-New York mayor that the assiduously promoted myth of Giuliani's supposedly exemplary leadership in the wake of 9/11 will begin to unravel upon any close inspection.

At the hearing itself, Whitman appeared to bow to these political concerns, declaring, "I don't think the mayor is blaming me, and I'm certainly not blaming the mayor."

In addition to testimony from former Bush administration officials, the House panel heard other evidence that indicated a much deeper cover-up of information about potential health hazards to rescue workers and residents.

David Newman, an industrial hygienist and a member of the World Trade Center Expert Technical Review Panel convened by the EPA, told the subcommittee that test results showed high levels of cancer-causing dioxins several blocks

from Ground Zero, but the EPA delayed release of these findings for more than a year.

He said, "Neither the EPA nor OSHA [the Occupational and Safety Health Administration] enforced their regulations, and I think that was inappropriate and possibly criminal."

A study conducted last year by the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York of over 20,000 people affected by the air near Ground Zero showed that over 70 percent suffered from some sort of respiratory illness.

Last month, New York City Chief Medical Examiner Charles Hirsch ruled that Felicia Dunn-Jones, a civil rights attorney who worked a block away from the World Trade Center, died in 2002 as a result of inhaling dust thrown up by the collapse of the twin towers. The cause of death was sarcoidosis, an inflammation of lung tissue that can spread to other parts of the body.

In a letter to Dunn-Jones's family, Hirsch wrote, "It is likely, with certainty beyond a reasonable doubt, that exposure to WTC dust was harmful to her. The manner of death will be changed from natural to homicide."

Dunn-Jones's family was present at the hearings on Monday as was the family of another victim of the Ground Zero dust, Police Detective James Zadroga, whose death a New Jersey coroner has also linked to the dust.

Last month the medical journal *Chest* published a study by nine researchers, including David Prezant, another member of the EPA's World Trade Center Expert Technical Review Panel. It concluded that firefighters who responded to the WTC catastrophe showed an increased incidence of sarcoidosis in addition to "WTC dust-induced asthma ... resulting from massive exposure to dust constituents."

Monday's hearings presented only a small glimpse into the criminality of the Bush administration and the disregard shown both by the administration in Washington and Giuliani's City Hall for the safety and health of hundreds of thousands affected by the events of September 11, 2001.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact