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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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Workers rise up after the Rospadskaya Mine Disaster

The Explosion

By Boris Kagarlitsky

Moscow

The Russian authorities are greatly afraid of any social explosion and take strenuous measures to head them off. They're particularly concerned about the situation in big cities with a high concentration of workers – as, for example, in the city of Togliatti, where the auto industry crisis has been threatening to erupt into mass protests.

Events were taking a predictable path. The government undertook measures to save the automotive industry. Opposition activists were hastily patching together regional coalitions, aiming to unite a variety of social movements and thus direct popular anger against the authorities. For their part, left ideologists staged lively discussions of the works of French philosophers and their mutual insults. In short: business as usual.

Then, from an entirely unexpected quarter, came trouble. On May 8, one day before the authorities in Moscow were to preside over an expensive and pompous celebration in honor of the defeat of Nazi Germany 65 years ago, a methane gas explosion rocked the Rospadskaya mine, located in Mezhdurechensk in West Siberia, 1,900 miles east of Moscow. When rescuers hastened to the aid of the miners, a second explosion thundered through the mine. Dozens of people found themselves in the underground trap. Five days later, 66 miners were officially declared dead, with a further 24 people listed as missing. Nevertheless, the following day it was decided to discontinue rescue operations and flood the damaged underground tunnels.

Only when the broadcasting frequencies ceased to be clogged with reports about the Victory parades, the official

Deadly Consequence of the 9/11 Attacks Is Only Now Beginning to Show Up

What the Asbestos Workers of Libby Montana Can Tell New Yorkers

By Andrea Peacock

Much has been made of the so-called Ground Zero Syndrome since the World Trade Center Towers collapsed, spewing pulverized construction material all over lower Manhattan. Lawsuits have been filed and settled, experts consulted, articles written, yet nearly nine years out we can only guess at the effects of asbestos on recovery workers and folks who lived in the vicinity. A recently released study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found an immediate decline in lung function for New York Fire Department and Emergency Medical personnel the first year after the Towers went down. While doctors continued to track those employees for another six years, they showed neither decline nor improvement.

As one industrial hygienist, who was on the scene, told me, "If you have too much of something, even water or good meal, it can affect you." There's no telling exactly what materials in that cloud of dust damaged those workers' lungs. But one thing is certain: the effects of asbestos have yet to be felt. With a latency period of 10 to 40 years or more, whatever asbestos-related diseases were unleashed that day are just gearing up.

Just as cleanup crews could have benefited enormously from the knowledge that the WTC's steel beams were insulated with asbestos-contaminated vermiculite from a W.R. Grace mine in Libby, Montana, so now might ailing New Yorkers learn from the experiences of this small town – experiences that I witnessed firsthand, for my book *Wasting Libby* which, culminates in the 2009 criminal trial of W.R. Grace & Co.

executives.

It's September 26, 2001, a strikingly pretty day in northwestern Montana, and, for the first time in weeks, it seems fitting to celebrate. The rich, deep hues provoked by autumn's diffuse sunlight exorcize the pall cast by the month's events in New York City, at least in this corner of the world. It's Gayla Benefield's birthday next week, so her kids are throwing a surprise party just outside of town at the steakhouse, where her daughter Julie works. She had been on her way to an economic development meeting that night, but the ruse – that Julie had a migraine and wanted her mother to be with her – works. Everyone shouts "surprise" at the appropriate moment, and if Gayla isn't surprised, she's gracious enough not to show it.

The crowd is a mix of family, friends, and asbestos campaigners. The EPA guys were supposed to show up, too, but got distracted by a tire fire south of Polson on their way to the party. Attorney Roger Sullivan, ever neurotic, asks if the festivities are going to be on the record. We haggle a bit, and I offer to use my journalistic discretion. It really isn't needed – the toasts and roasts are all good-natured. Norita passes on the microphone, so Les gets up first to tell about the time he and Gayla traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify against a bill that would have effectively canceled most Libby claimants' rights to go to court. Wanting a beer one night, they walked endlessly looking for a bar; the one they found had never heard of go-cups (a Montana standard, for those who literally want one for the road).

KAGARLITSKY CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

PEACOCK CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

PEACOCK CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Finally, an older woman stands to make a toast, "If it weren't for Gayla, nobody would care about those poor people breathing asbestos back in New York."

It's been only two weeks since the World Trade Center's collapse, and by September 26 we're just now starting to hear rumors of high asbestos readings in the massive dust cloud that blanketed lower Manhattan. EPA director, Christine Todd Whitman, has declared the area safe, but, in fact, both her agency and independent monitors have found the deadly fibers in the air, in the dust, in people's homes, and in their offices. According to the *New York Times*, approximately 20,000 people live within half a mile of the former World Trade Center. There is potentially a great tragedy in the making, the full scale of which perhaps can be understood only by the people gathered here tonight. There is silence, a collective shudder at the thought of it.

There are a lot of unanswered questions. But New York's EPA officials sure could have had a running start on the situation had they listened to their counterparts from Denver who, for two years, had been dealing with the Libby mess, ultimately stigmatized by the EPA as "the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance [asbestos] in U.S. his-

tory." If the New York EPA had paid attention, they would have known that the old method of counting fibers is dreadfully inadequate, that people can get sick 40 years after smaller, briefer exposures than were commonly accepted as safe, and that honesty and candor are the only way to earn the respect and cooperation of those you are trying to help.

Though none of us know it yet, the link from Libby to New York is closer than the commonality of death. According to the man who engineered the Trade Center Towers, it was W.R. Grace that supplied the fireproofing, which enveloped the steel beams holding the buildings up. And all the vermiculite in that material –

EPA director, Christine Todd Whitman, declared the area around Ground Zero safe, but, in fact, both her agency and independent monitors found the deadly fibers in the air, in the dust, in people's homes, and in their offices.

thousands of tons worth – came from the mine on Vermiculite Mountain, near the town of Libby.

But in the days and weeks after the attack, the East Coast feds were more concerned with the panic that more bad news might bring, so, even as Gayla was blowing out the candles on her cake, rescue crews were working around the clock in the dust at Ground Zero without proper respirators. Within a few weeks, people would move back into their apartments. Those with the foresight and money could have their premises tested and cleaned. As for everyone else, they might as well be living in one of Libby's old houses, their apartments potentially just as full of invisible death as those Montana homes sifting Zonolite (a commercial name for vermiculite) dust from the attic that only the fanciest wet HEPA vacuum can clean up.

Someone should have known better. Libby's EPA guys offered their expertise, their microscopes, the benefit of their experience, and they were rebuffed. "We were not asked to participate in the re-

sponse to the WTC disaster, and we feel it would be inappropriate for us to second guess actions taken there since we are not apprised of all the variables," toxicologist Chris Weis emailed me.

One New Yorker, a woman named Liz Berger, testified before a Senate subcommittee five months later on the difficulties and uncertainties facing the World Trade Center's former neighbors:

"It took eight guys in white suits and respirators five days to clean my apartment. But is it clean? No one tells you what to keep and what to toss... What's in the stuff? Every day the air smelled different, and the winds blew a different course.

"We reluctantly made our own rules, divined from press reports, high school science as we remembered it, and the advice of friends and neighbors. But even that was mixed. One scientist friend had his apartment tested and declared it safe for his family; the managing agent of his building, however, reported high levels of asbestos and lead. In the end, 248 stuffed animals, eight handmade baby quilts, five mattresses, a trousseau's worth of sheets and towels, a kitchen full of food and 13 leaf and lawn bags of toys went into our trash, but not our books, draperies and upholstered furniture, or our clothes, though the bill to dry clean them industrially was \$16,500... Some people we know repainted but kept their mattresses. Some people kept their stuffed animals but threw away their furniture. Some people kept what they couldn't bear to lose and got rid of the rest. We have still not decided what to do about our floors: will stripping, sanding and resealing them contain the toxic mix of asbestos, fiberglass, concrete, human remains, heavy metals and the vague 'particulates,' or just release more of it into our indoor air?

"Indoor air quality is a touchy issue in our building. Converted in the late 1970s, we have a primitive air system that circulates air from apartment to apartment. Some people in our building hired professional cleaners. Others did it themselves, and a few locked the door and didn't come back for a while. After the guys in the suits left, we sealed our windows, filtered our vents, and bought six triple-HEPA-filtered air purifiers, which we run 24 hours a day. My clean air is making its way through the building, as is that of my less fastidious neighbors."

Liz Berger's current troubles are rooted in events that took place more than 20 years before Osama Bin Laden was born. By the early 1930s, the leaders of America's asbestos industry knew they

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