

CounterPunch

JUNE 1-15, 2010

ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

VOL. 17, NO. 11

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

CounterPunch

EDITORS

ALEXANDER COCKBURN
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

ASSISTANT EDITOR

ALEVINA REA

BUSINESS

BECKY GRANT
DEVA WHEELER

DESIGN

TIFFANY WARDLE

COUNSELOR

BEN SONNENBERG

CounterPunch

PO Box 228

Petrolia, CA 95558

1-800-840-3683

counterpunch@counterpunch.org

www.counterpunch.org

All rights reserved.

were in trouble but, through a convoluted web of secret research, linguistic and legal maneuvers, managed to stay solvent for another 50 years – and keep their dirty secret quiet long enough to build the world's greatest skyscrapers, including the twin towers of New York.

More than two decades after the asbestos industry researchers made the cancer connection, an independent doctor working at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York released the results of his research in a series of articles, which made the name Selikoff synonymous with asbestos. In 1964, Dr. Irving Selikoff laid to rest niggling doubts about the cancer link with a study finding elevated cancer deaths among asbestos insulation workers at more than seven times the normal rate. Even more shocking was his 1968 report, in which he described the synergistic effect between smoking and asbestos exposure, finding the risk level for cancer at 92 times the rate for the nonsmoking, non-asbestos-exposed population. He pushed these details at medical conferences and in the popular press, to the consternation of asbestos companies. "Dr. Selikoff started to speak out publicly to our knowledge in early 1969 around New York and, in fact, got the fireproofing subcontractors and sprayed fiber manufacturers association to form a committee to set standards to improve job conditions," Grace executive Thomas Egan writes in 1970. "The general feeling was that he would go away if he was treated gently. But this was not to be, as he stepped up his attack..." Testifying before a Congressional subcommittee in 1973, Selikoff predicted that if America didn't change its ways, one million workers would die of asbestos-related diseases by the turn of the century.

By the late 1960s, Selikoff's studies and the resulting publicity were having their intended effects. Cities and states began regulating asbestos use: New York, Chicago, Boston, California. Federal agencies followed suit. The Bureau of Mines, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, and Consumer Products Safety Council (CPSC) all regulated their corner of the asbestos market. Legal workplace exposure limits fell steadily, as a waterfall, through the 1970s: from 12 fibers per milliliter down to five, to two, and, fi-

nally, down to OSHA's current limit of .1 fibers/ml of air. The CPSC banned a few products in the late '70s – fake fireplace logs and asbestos hairdryers. Then, in the 1980s, the EPA waged a widely publicized campaign to remove asbestos from school buildings.

But it was one of the first asbestos rules that was the most far-reaching, and it gave the W.R. Grace Company fits over one of its most popular products, MonoKote. In 1973, the EPA won authority, under the federal National Emission Standard for Asbestos law, to ban friable (or easily crumbled) spray-on "asbestos-containing materials" with greater than one per cent asbestos content by dry weight – a category that included Grace's MonoKote-3. The recipe for MonoKote-3

Libby's EPA guys offered their expertise, their microscopes, the benefit of their experience of asbestos contamination, and they were rebuffed. "We were not asked to participate in the response to the WTC disaster."

called for about 12 per cent commercial chrysotile asbestos added to a blend of nearly 30 per cent of Libby's vermiculite grade three, and rounded out with 58 per cent gypsum.

Companies got around the requirement to some extent, because of the word "friable": theoretically, asbestos that was bound up in some way in a material that wouldn't crumble and disperse the fibers was safer. It became common for insulation and fireproofing manufacturers to "bind" their fibers with organic material like cellulose and rock wool. And there was good reason to do so. In the era of skyscrapers, spray-on insulation was in high demand. The construction industry used fireproofing that flowed easily through hoses and could be pumped to great heights. In the case of the World Trade Center, according to project engineer Hyman Brown, Grace's MonoKote was the fireproofing of choice, making it possible to use light-weight beams that otherwise might melt too quickly in case

of fire. "Theoretically, you have fireproofing on a beam to retard the melting of the steel," he says, "and you put the fireproofing on the beam with the theory that the fire will only burn at about 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit, and, therefore, the fireproofing will do its job." The engineers did not anticipate a fire fed by jet fuel, which simply burned too hot for the fireproofing to handle, Brown says.

Grace president Bill Corcoran told reporters in the aftermath of the Towers' collapse that his company's products were not used in the World Trade Center's construction. But Allen Morrison, spokesperson for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (which owned the towers), contradicts Corcoran, saying that Grace's product was used to fireproof the buildings, though he could not give any details as to the quantity used.

By the time construction on the Trade Center's steel structures began in 1968, the buzz over asbestos disease began to crescendo. Grace won the contract to supply fireproofing for the project but was savvy enough to not refer to its product as MonoKote. "In an effort to provide the proper fire protection and provide heat flow into the column, it was felt that a dense vermiculite-gypsum plaster could best fulfill the needs," reads an April 1968 analysis prepared by Grace, titled, "Study of the Interior Fire Protection Requirements of the Exterior Columns for the World Trade Center Project." EPA toxicologist Chris Weis says this "dense vermiculite-gypsum plaster" was likely MonoKote-3. "They were calling it whatever they had to call it to market it," he says. "The vermiculite imparted the fireproofing. Unfortunately, it may have been, you know, five to 15 per cent tremolite asbestos."

In 1970, public outcry caught up with Grace. That April, the City of New York enacted a series of restrictions on sprayed asbestos-containing materials, which effectively prohibited the company's work at the World Trade Center. According to an article in the May 7 *Engineering News-Record*, "Sprayed-asbestos fireproofing operations on steel-framed buildings halted last week in New York City. The stoppage resulted from regulations written after medical research showed that asbestos fibers can cause cancer of the pulmonary and gastrointestinal tracts if ingested." The stoppage affected four

buildings in New York, according to the article. "Ironically, the World Trade Center project was the first and only building in the city where the spray contractor had taken precautions to prevent scattering of dried asbestos... The job, however, lacked the vacuum cleaning operation as required by the regulations." Workers had only insulated the first 70 floors of the North Tower at that point, according to a subsequent story in the *Newark Evening News*. But, as one internal corporate memo implies, Grace had anticipated such a move at least since 1969. "We should do everything we can to speed up our search for a substitute for the asbestos in our MonoKote," district

One news report at the time said the project called for an estimated 5,000 tons of sprayed fireproofing. Using Weis' calculations, that adds up to somewhere between 250 and 750 tons of tremolite asbestos.

manager Jim Cintani writes on October 3, 1969. "We would certainly be at a distinct advantage if we could say our product did not contain any asbestos."

By the time Grace was kicked off the job in 1970, it had a substitute product to offer. "We are currently working on modifying the MonoKote formula to replace the asbestos and have fire tests scheduled with the Underwriters' Laboratories in the next two months," Grace official Rod Vining writes on April 10, 1970, three days before New York City's new regulations took effect. "We are currently working on trying to get a switch made at the World Trade Center and other building projects."

Grace won approval from the City of New York in 1971 to use its new product, MonoKote-4, which the company marketed as being a "non-asbestos-fireproofing product." And, truly, the company figured out a way to substitute a cellulose-based fiber for the 12 per cent commercial chrysotile in MonoKote-3 but still used Libby vermiculite grade three. And that ore, Weis says, was the baddest

CounterPunch Books

"*Wasting Libby* is a smart, solid and resonant account of corporate wickedness and the small Montana company town betrayed unto the very death by its largest employer."

— Joy Williams, author of *Ill Nature* and *The Changeling*

"Andrea Peacock skillfully exposes a true axis of evil and its dire human effects. This is a 'must read' for people of conscience."

— Jim Harrison, author of *Dalva* and *The English Teacher*

Wasting Libby: The True Story
of How the WR Grace Corporation
Left a Montana Town to Die
(and Got Away With It)

Andrea Peacock
Introduction by Jeff Bridges



Wasting Libby's story, which culminates in the 2009 criminal trial of WR Grace & Co. executives, is ultimately the tale of the families who fought the corporation for justice, who refused to sacrifice their dignity even as they lost their lives.

To order **CounterPunch** books and newsletter subscriptions call **1 (800) 840-3683** or visit our website **www.counterpunch.org**

The Most Widely Read Radical Website In The English Language

of the bad. "Size three probably had more tremolite asbestos than any of the Libby ore," he says.

According to engineer Brown, now a professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder, that switch was made at the World Trade Center. "So, I can tell you right now that [MonoKote-3] was used in the first building, most of the first building, and [MonoKote-4] was used for the rest of the first building and the second building because we were told that [MonoKote-4] did not have asbestos in it."

Two hundred and forty-four steel beams ringed each of the towers, with more beams around each elevator core, and steel trusses supporting every one of 110 floors in both buildings. Though Brown doesn't recall specifically how much MonoKote went into the towers, one news report at the time said the project called for an estimated 5,000 tons of sprayed fireproofing. Using Weis' calculations, that adds up to between 250 and 750 tons of tremolite asbestos.

If asbestos-related diseases begin showing up in rescue workers and others exposed at Ground Zero in the next few years, there's little doctors can do about it. There's medication to ease the symptoms of asbestosis – in which scar tissue caused by asbestos fibers gradually suffocates victims – but no cure. Those with lung disease can forestall the inevitable decline by taking care of themselves: quit smoking, get plenty of exercise to keep their lung capacity as high as possible. It could take another 30 years for mesothelioma cases to manifest – an asbestos-related lung cancer that kills fast once it hits. The full legacy of that day, for which W.R. Grace now bears some responsibility, will be unfolding for decades.

CP

Andrea Peacock has covered Montana politics and western environmental news for nearly two decades. A former editor of the *Missoula Independent*, Peacock is the co-author of *The Essential Grizzly: The Mingled Fates of Men and Bears* with her husband, Doug. She lives south of Livingston, Montana. This month, CounterPunch Books is releasing Peacock's *Wasting Libby: the True Story of How the WR Grace Corporation left a Montana town to die (and got away with it.)* She can be reached at apeacock@wispwest.net

Here's One "Quicksand" You Should Wade Into

By Jeffrey Blankfort

There is a book out there that the Israel lobby doesn't want Americans to read. It's *Quicksand: America's Pursuit of Power in the Middle East*, by professor Geoffrey Wawro, released by Penguin in April. Although Wawro, who teaches Military History at the University of North Texas, has a distinguished reputation in his field, his latest book has yet to receive a single review or even a mention in the mainstream press.

There is no way that Wawro can be portrayed as a wild-eyed radical, outside of the mainstream, and a "he's anti-Semitic" smear campaign on the Lobby's part would quite likely backfire.

Before writing *Quicksand*, Wawro had specialized in nineteenth-century European military history, a relatively tranquil field of study. Writing a history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East that paints a critical picture of Israel and its U.S. lobby is something else. That's what Wawro has discovered to his surprise. After producing such histories as *The Austro-Prussian War*, *The Franco-Prussian War*, and *Warfare and Society in Europe, 1792-1914* – the first two of which became History and Military Book Club selections, and the third a standard college text – Wawro ventured into dangerous territory, when he produced a comprehensive (702 pages) history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East.

Unlike his works on European history that were warmly welcomed by the media, *Quicksand* has been ignored. It is not hard to figure out why. Clearly, he is paying the price for his shredding of popular myths about the establishment of Israel, his clear sympathy for the Palestinians, and his exposure of the workings of the Zionist lobby going back to the administration of President Woodrow Wilson, all of which topics

Wawro covers straightforwardly, pulling no punches.

There is no way that Wawro can be portrayed as a wild-eyed radical, outside of the mainstream, and a "he's anti-Semitic" smear campaign on the Lobby's part would quite likely backfire, although it is not out of the question. Before taking his current post, the telegenic Wawro was professor of Strategic Studies at the Naval War College and became visible to a sizeable segment of the reading public when he hosted History Channel's book show, *Hardcover History*, and was the host and anchor of the History Channel programs, *History's Business* and *History vs. Hollywood*, as well as *Hard Target*, *Global View*, and *History in Focus*.

It was, in fact, the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon which turned his attention from 19th century Europe to the Middle East and sent him on a quest to find out why people of that region bear such a degree of ill will toward the United States and the West.

This is not a polemic. *Quicksand* contains 60 pages of tiny footnotes, nine pages of bibliography, and a superb index, many of the former originating from documents in British and U.S. National Archives that had either been ignored or recently declassified. Taken together, they convinced Wawro that the main reason for anti-U.S. sentiments has been U.S. support for Israel and that this support has been engendered to a large extent by "the bluster" of the Israel [and pre-Israel] lobby, "to which every president since Wilson has succumbed."

"The Truman instinct on Israel," writes Wawro, "became the abiding American instinct. Every U.S. president after Truman tailored his electoral campaigns – as well as midterm congressional ones – to the exigencies of what gradually came to be known as the 'Israel Lobby'... The Israel Lobby developed a bullying reputation – pointing out that American Jews were concentrated in critical states with vital blocs of electoral votes and that they gave generously to friendly campaigns and not at all to unfriendly ones. It became difficult for American presidents