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Cancer in Auto Town.

Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*. [<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id126.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

By Mike Westfall

5-2009

CANCER IN AUTO TOWN

Don't Drink The Water, Breath The Air, Touch The Soil Or Eat The Fish

Love Canal taught us that where we live and work there are inexcusable consequences resulting from toxic chemicals being quietly dumped into the earth and air of our communities. This New York canal was a half-mile trench dug during the 1890's. It became an industrial dumpsite in the 1920,s, was covered up and a community of homes and a school were built upon it.

By 1978 this toxic time bomb began to burst open releasing over 80 different chemical compounds, including 11 carcinogens rising upwards through the earth into the homes, yards and school, resulting in dead trees, dead gardens and horrific health problems for the folks that populated this area. The air became choking to breath, and the children were being burned as they played outside from the presence of toxic wastes. There were resulting miscarriages, retardation and one third of the residents were found to have undergone chromosomal damage. There were also high white blood cell counts, which is a precursor to leukemia. One survey found that 56% of the children born from 1974-1978 had a birth defect.

In the cities and towns where industrial factories operate, Americans depend on the resulting jobs and tax base to help finance their local governments and the services they provide. Certainly in these areas there are those who have raised questions about potentially serious factory related toxic health issues. They must struggle to balance the financial advantages with these health fears. These people have a special obligation to be very careful, since the EPA has announced that there could be terrible human and financial consequences paid by workers and the communities exposed to toxic chemicals used in manufacturing processes.

There could be a day of reckoning for their community, if they accept small answers to the large questions, because Love Canal was not a one-time aberration. One only has to look to the 1997 National Research Council's estimate that the cost of cleaning up the thousands of known contaminated US sites at that time could take 75 years and cost \$1 trillion.

Today, we are all rightfully concerned about a green and clean environment. Has this responsible desire to remove emissions from exhaust tailpipes overshadowed the lethal issue of toxic vapors billowing from the factories smoke stacks? Automobile pollution really does affect us in two distinct and detrimental arenas. The damaging uniqueness is that the auto assembly factory can be considered the matriarch polluter, which has the capability of spewing out her harmful toxic pollution. Secondly, her sole mission in life is to give birth to shiny horn honking, oil and gas guzzling new polluters at the rate of 60 per hour with a life expectancy of 200,000 miles.

In 2002 the EPA cited General Motors and Ford as two of the top 100 corporate air polluters. Again in March of 2006 the Political Economy Research Institute rated General Motors as the 20th worst polluter. While this issue is far from being limited to General Motors, because of GM's manufacturing importance, highlighting a few points surrounding GM should bring into the daylight the impact of this problem for manufacturing as a whole.

How much air pollution can just one factory produce? A March12, 2000 information sheet released by Stanford.edu, stated that GM's Delphi facility in Indiana released 603,900 pounds of toxic chemicals into the environment in 1994 alone. The sheet also said that GM discharged more than 1,100 tons of volatile organic compounds in Arlington, Texas. GM has in fact been cited for environmental infractions resulting in fines such as for violations at the Saginaw, Michigan castings operation where the plant was exceeding limits for particulate matter.

Gm is no stranger to being confronted by neighborhoods on toxic waste dumping. One example was the GM foundry division plant located in St. Lawrence County, NY that has been in operation since 1958. In 1983 the EPA released a directive stating that this GM plant posed a major menace to human health. It was ultimately placed on the EPA's Superfund national priority list as a hazardous waste site. PCB's are believed to cause cancer, and it stated this GM hazardous site contained 850,000 cubic yards of waste containing PCB's.

The EPA determined that sediment in the St. Lawrence River, Raquette River and nearby St. Regis Mohawk

Indian Reservation was also contaminated with PCB's. They affirmed, "individuals ingesting or touching contaminated groundwater, soil, sludge's, or sediments potentially are at risk". This issue concerned GM enough that it began distributing bottled water to area residents for a period of time while claiming no wrongdoing.

Christopher A. Amato, deputy chief of the attorney general's bureau charged of GM, " they have basically flouted the law for 25 years". Attorney General Spitzer sent GM a letter stating that the company knew that their landfills here endangered public health and the environment yet they refused to control the release of these toxins from their property. The Mohawk Tribal Chief said GM's industrial waste dump here had been poisoning the Mohawk people for over 50 years.

Yet another GM toxic site was Indiana's GM Powertrain Bedford Facility, which had about one million square feet of floor space. It produced engine blocks, pistons and transmission casings. According to the EPA, this facility discharged PCB's and contaminated areas including floodplain soil within the Pleasant Run Creek watershed. The EPA stated that this area included about five miles of creek. One local news source stated that the EPA determined that the contamination had migrated into the fish and birds in the area.

In 1988 workers in GM's Lordstown, Ohio factory, concerned about high factory death rates, formed Workers Against Toxic Waste, (WATCH) and created "The GM Lordstown Memorial" which listed deceased workers from this factory.

They demanded a study be done on worker death rates. While the UAW-GM committee would not admit to exposures in the work environment, the resulting 1989 study showed stomach and pancreatic cancer at 6.7 and 3.3 times the expected rate. In May of 1990, a Multinational Monitor report was released stating that over 3 million pounds of toxic chemicals were released from this factory. In his 1993 book, *Who Will Tell The People*, Simon & Schuster, best selling Author William Greider discussed how the EPA responded to the GM's Lordstown workers and fined GM \$1.5 million for toxic air pollution from the plant.

American based multi-nationals have been slow to admit any wrong doing relative to their possible misuse of toxic substances that expose workers and communities to health dangers. It has been very easy for them to simply pay a fine, deny the charges and ignore the human cost.

In his infinite wisdom, God must be looking at American industry with a tear in one eye and consternation in the other as he sees how the haves of this world are treating the have-nots.

In June of 2001 a Mark Feldsein and Steve Singer Time story, titled *Border Babies*, discussed one lethal event that crippled and killed dozens of newborn babies from 1988-1992 in Brownsville, Texas. 30 children were born with almost no brain, and 25 other children were born with Spina Bifida. They had shocking openings in the back of their skulls that Brownsville doctor Manuel Guajardo declared, " It would look like somebody took a knife and just whacked the top of their head off".

There were many industries located in this area, and while the cause of this appalling event was never totally identified, the mothers and fathers of these terribly deformed and dead babies filed a lawsuit that blamed the American based multi-national companies directly across the Rio Grande in the Mexican town of Matamoros. General Motors had moved three factories to Matamoros and was a defendant in this case. According to the article a GM manager admitted in an internal memo, that the company had sold barrels contaminated with toxic residues to a recycler, which was a direct violation of the law. According to the article the manager wrote, a GM study found solvents, which can be carcinogenic and may damage developing fetuses in GM's wastewater discharge.

While the companies denied being responsible for these birth defects, they settled the lawsuit in 1995 and paid a paltry \$17 million to the families of these suffering children. Internal corporate documents obtained from CNN suggested that American corporations were using Mexico's border as a private dumping ground and taking advantage of Mexico's lax environmental enforcement to contaminate the region with hazardous waste.

Mike Bennett the retired president of UAW Local 326 in Flint, Michigan, which represented General Motor's now closed Flint Ternstedt factory, said that behind this GM factory were huge settling ponds where chemicals full of toxic poisonous waste and heavy metal contaminants were pumped. He said that many people in the surrounding area had wells for drinking water and the factory emitted tons of toxic material from the exhaust

stacks, which potentially ended up in the homes of everyone in the area. Workers in this plant were exposed to this deadly toxic soup, and Bennett said the workers were dying of cancer at up to three times the national average.

How many more of these toxic sites lie around GM plants? How about Ford and Chrysler? What about other industrial factories in other industries?

While factories can potentially impact everyone around them, there is one area that needs special consideration and that is the exposure of our kids to this pollution. According to the EPA, children are particularly vulnerable to various pollutants, because they're still growing and therefore breathe more air than adults relative to their weight. They are a captive segment and any hazardous toxic chemical exposure that exists at their school's doorsteps could expose them throughout their educational years.

A recent 12-10-2008 USA Today article by Blake Morrison and Brad Heath discussed how kids are being exposed to toxic air pollution. It used a government-screening tool to identify and rank 127,800 public, private and parochial schools around the nation. This model contains very powerful information, and it clearly shows there are many serious industrial polluters in this nation. Extrapolating the information from this tool on just one school allows us to better understand and appreciate the far-reaching significance of this data. In this model a 1 percentile is the worst possible case for industrial pollution and a 100 percentile is the least polluted.

I will use Michigan's Flint Carman Park Elementary School, which has the high and alarming distinction of being in the 4th percentile nationally to the exposure of both cancer-causing air born elements and also exposure to other toxic chemicals. The school evaluation tool cites that the chemicals at the doorsteps of this Flint elementary school include trimethylbenzene, which can impair blood coagulation, glycol ethers, prolonged exposure can cause liver and kidney damage, anemia, tremors and damage to the neurological system, manganese and manganese compounds, overexposure can cause emotional disturbances or a disease of the brain called manganism, formaldehyde, which the EPA classifies as a probable human carcinogen and zylene, which can cause confusion and even death with prolonged exposure.

This tool identified the polluters, the chemicals and the other schools affected from the factories pollution. Understandably these chemicals are the same chemicals that the autoworkers are exposed to, because they are coming from nearby auto factories.

The nearby factories most responsible are:

- 1) GM Truck Group Flint Assembly Plant, which emits glycol ethers, manganese and manganese compounds, formaldehyde, butyl alcohol and benzene plus the other chemicals.
- 2) The General Motors Corp. Powertrain Flint North which emits manganese and manganese compounds, nickel and nickel compounds, lead and lead compounds and copper and copper compounds.
- 3) The GM Powertrain Saginaw Malleable Iron in Saginaw, Michigan which emits manganese and manganese compounds, lead and lead compounds, chromium and chromium compounds, and cumene hydroperoxide.

The picture of an ugly industrial family tree quickly appears when you see that each of the GM factories that affect Flint's Carman Park Elementary School also affect other area schools.

If the neighbors around these auto factories have been impacted, then just how much more potent has this exposure been for the factory workers and the auto retirees who have worked a lifetime around these toxic hazards? The corporation's answer to their employees, who have endured this exposure, is to jettison their healthcare responsibilities when autoworkers retire and need it most. The assault that has been going on against all of America's fixed and low-income retirees in all industries could not be clearer. It is a cultural tragedy and a genuine American human rights issue.

The sad facts in the big picture are that these lethal health issues are far from being limited to General Motors or the auto industry. The sober information contained in this article is all public information. Why haven't the proper authorities connected the dots? Why has there been a total breakdown and failure by the corporations, the unions and the government?

If you live on this earth, then taking 75 years to clean it up is insane. You can't pick and choose which site will be cleaned up. That is saying that the people in one city will have their environment uncontaminated, but those in another city will have to pretend there is no problem and face the health issues on their own. All the

sites need to be cleaned up.

Why aren't the politicians who are using tax dollars to wallpaper over the sins of Wall Street sounding an alarm for Main Street on this issue? Why have they only required the paying of insignificant token fines against polluters, looked the other way or swept the problem under the carpet as workers and surrounding neighbors were exposed to substances that could cause their death?

The companies who created this toxic Hades should be held financially accountable for cleaning it up, not the taxpayers. There also needs to be moral and social accountability where those deemed responsible face federal charges for endangering the workers and the public.

It isn't hard to connect the dots on this one. America has a toxic crisis in its backyard. It is poisoning our people through the water we drink, the air we breathe, the land that produces our food, and the animals we eat. How many lives have to be lost, and how many people must suffer from cancer, birth defects, chromosome damage and other horrific health issues before Americans demand a clean environment?

How much are we going to put up with before we say clean it upand clean it up now!

Mike Westfall

westfallpapers@yahoo.com