Nukewatch Quarterly

Nuclear Weapons Workers Die Waiting for Care and Compensation

By Kelly Lundeen

This year marks the milestone commemorations of the devastating Trinity bomb test and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By contrast, an anniversary to be celebrated is the 20 years since enactment of the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act (EEOICPA) of 2000. This is the program that has helped 126,000 nuclear and uranium workers access $18 billion to date in medical and disability benefits and compensation for deaths and illnesses related to exposures to radiation and toxic substances while at work building the US nuclear arsenal.

The EEOICPA was brought into effect after nuclear workers at a uranium enrichment facility, the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant, in Kentucky, filed a $10 billion class-action lawsuit against federal government contractors. This is only one of the 350 nuclear weapons production, research and development sites and thousands of uranium mines and mills that have had former workers lining up to access the program.

Applying for benefits and compensation under EEOICPA is a complicated and long process. Today nearly 13,000 claims have been filed and are awaiting a decision while 9,000 claims have been denied.

“Have you ever heard of this guy?” “My name is Joe Harding,” he starts in a 1980 audio cassette memoir. “I was 28 years old. I had a story that I think everyone in America should know about. I heard about the atomic energy [Union Carbide] plant that was being built at Paducah, Kentucky…[it] seemed to be important to the country…[I was] 28 years old… I was strong and healthy and tough.”

Meet Clara Harding. “He began to have mutations from his joints, his fingers, toes, his angles, his skin, his voice and he died waiting and that’s ‘not just an occasional occurrence’,” said PCM spokesperson Tim Lerew, who paid with their health and sometimes their life working in the nuclear weapons complex. See more at coldwarpatrons.org.

Majority Opinion: Eliminate the ICBMs

On Aug. 7, the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland published a report of its survey of 86,000 people in the US. The report, “Common Ground of the American People,” finds broad support for eliminating the remaining land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) instead of replacing them. Majority approval of phasing out the ICBMs was 69% among Democrats; 53% among Republicans; and 61% overall.

The elimination of the remaining 400 ICBMs, also known as Minuteman III missiles, and the cancelation of their planned replacement, would have a major impact on US nuclear weapons production.

The entire basis for the plans to restart the production of plutonium warhead cores, or “pits,” for new ICBM warheads, is to buy a brand-new generation of ICBMs by 2030,” reported Matt Korda in Forbes online, Aug. 12. “In reality, these costs are expected to rise, given that the contract will be sole-sourced to Northrop Grumman.

“Why is this $100 billion project still moving forward?” Korda asked, then suggested an answer. “Northrop Grumman—the only bidder for the ICBM replacement contract—spent more than $162 million on lobbying between 2008 and 2018, with the bulk of the contributions going to members of the ‘ICBM Caucus’ [or ‘Doomsday Lobby’]—a coalition of Senators from states where ICBMs are deployed. In 2018, this lobbying effort helped kill an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act which called for a feasibility study on extending the life of the current ICBM force, rather than rebuilding it from scratch.

The costly corporate arms-twisting has paid off. On Sept. 8, the Air Force awarded Northrop Grumman the first $13.3 billion contract for the new missile system which, the Air Force Wing Post said, is in the long-run expected to be worth $85 billion for the weapons giant.

“...Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group in Albuquerque, New Mexico contributed reporting for this story.

EPA Law Enforcement Suspended Under Cover of Covid

By Christine Manwiller

In March 2020, the US Environmental Protection Agency suspended its enforcement of certain regulations to allow the Trump administration to focus on Covid-19. The agency’s principal mission is to protect human health and the environment, but recognize that [those] challenges resulting from efforts to protect workers and the public from Covid-19 may directly impact the ability of regulated facilities to meet all federal regulatory requirements,” EPA administrator Andrew Wheeler said in a press release. The ongoing rule suspends regulations that would break EPA rules and regulations, if the violations can be linked to Covid-19. There was no end date set for the pollution holiday.

The move allows increases in air and water pollution, improper handling of fracking wastewater, and suspension of industrial reporting of greenhouse gas emissions. Former EPA officials were stunned, and predicted catastrophic consequences. Gina McCarthy, president and CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council and former EPA Administrator, said, “This is an open license to pollute. The administration should be giving all its attention to making our country healthier right now. Instead it is taking advantage of an unprecedented public health crisis to do favors for polluters that threaten public health.”

Last January Mr. Trump signed a repeal of water protections that had limited the pollution of drinking water sources for about out of the country. Trump’s repeal allows farm and industrial wastes to pollute millions of miles of streams and about half of US wetlands.

The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission also issued risky pandemic rules that raise work-week caps from 72 to 84 hours, and potentially allow reactor refueling for 72 to 84 months. Reactor refueling will continue uninterrupted, although some workers travel to small communities, potentially spreading Covid-19 infections. Beyond Nuclear’s Kevin Kamps called the action dangerous. “How inspections, repairs and replacements of safety-significant systems can go undone and not increase risk, has not been adequately explained by the NRC.”

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