Latest Hanford Incident: USW Workers Inhale Plutonium

First, USW Local 12-369 members reported toxic chemical fumes at the Hanford nuclear reservation’s tank farms were making them sick.

Then, in May 2017 a USW nuclear chemical operator and another worker discovered a 20-foot hole in an underground tunnel filled with plutonium-contaminated equipment leading to the Plutonium Uranium Extraction Facility (PUREX).

Now, some workers—including USW members—tested positive for inhaling radioactive plutonium and americium particles when radiation alarms activated on June 8, 2017 during demolition at the Plutonium Reclamation Facility.

“It is one incident after another at Hanford and it never stops,” said USW International Vice President Carol Landry, who heads the union’s atomic sector. “This latest event shows the Department of Energy (DOE) and contractors’ complete disregard for the health and safety of the workers when it comes to meeting their production deadlines.”

Deadlines & Money

DOE has a legal deadline with the state of Washington to tear down to the ground the Plutonium Finishing Plant (PFP) by Sept. 30, 2017, but it notified regulators that it might miss it.

If the demolition work contractor, CH2M Hill Plateau Remediation Co. (CH2M), can meet the deadline, it could reap millions in bonus money from the DOE. Not only can contractors get paid millions of dollars to complete a cleanup job, but the agency will use tax dollars to pay bonuses for finishing early, on time and/or doing quality work.

With millions of extra bonus dollars at stake to pump up their profits, contractors send the message to workers that they need to speed up cleanup production. This puts workers in the position of risking their health and safety in order to keep their jobs. Publicly, the contractors say they are conducting the job in a safe way.

An example of this was when the media reported that some workers near the demolition project on June 8 were not wearing full respiratory protection. When asked about this, some long-time workers said using the gear is expensive, slows work down and could jeopardize CH2M from finishing the demolition work on time.

Contractors have told workers these messages for decades. Personal protective equipment costs money and that decreases the bonuses these contractors receive for themselves and their shareholders. They put workers in a position to risk their lives, and the workers do not receive any of the bonus money.

For years, whistleblowers have said that DOE and the contractors will sacrifice worker health and safety in order to meet cleanup deadlines.

Double-Speak

DOE ordered about 350 workers demolishing the Plutonium Reclamation Facility and other buildings within the PFP complex to take cover indoors on June 8, 2017 because an alarm warned of the airborne release of radioactive particles.

That same day, the Washington State Department of Health collected air samples at the Rattlesnake Barricade, where employees enter the secure area of Hanford off Highway 240.

At the time, DOE and CH2M downplayed the June 8 incident, with statements like it appeared “workers were not at risk” and there was “no evidence radioactive particles had been inhaled” by workers.

However, a July 21 memo to employees from PFP Safety, Health and RadCon Director Todd Southerland told another story.

Southerland wrote that 301 bioassay kits were distributed to employees present at the June 8 incident, with statements like it appeared “workers were not at risk” and there was “no evidence radioactive particles had been inhaled” by workers.

He wrote that the final dose evaluation for the first 65 bioassays showed “a small number” of employees with a dose of less than or equal to 1 millirem. Sources told Seattle TV station KING 5 that 12 tested positive, and workers with years of service said that was the highest number of people internally contaminated they had seen while working at Hanford.

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Mixed Messages on Plutonium Inhalation Risk

Southerland then compared the 1 millirem or less exposure level to the 10 millirems a person can receive from a standard chest x-ray.

This month, Washington state health department officials told the Hanford Advisory Board committee that the air sample analysis showed “very, very low” levels of plutonium and americium contamination and that the level of exposure was not a health risk.

Risk Downplayed?

Is the risk from ingesting plutonium being downplayed?

Radioactive particles remain within a worker’s body for a lifetime, and exposure is measured as the radiation dose a worker would be exposed to internally over 50 years, said the DOE. The test results were calculated at 1 millirem or less of radiation over 50 years.

The legal limit for atomic workers is 5,000 millirems per year, and CH2M sets a limit of 500 millirems per year.

Several Hanford workers and radiation experts told KING 5 the messaging from CH2M and DOE was “misleading” and did not explain the actual danger to inhaling the radionuclides plutonium and americium.

Not all radiation is the same, said the experts. X-rays do not emit alpha radiation like plutonium. Alpha particles damage or destroy DNA and can cause cancer. One expert said the workers’ risk could be low because of the small dosage, but alpha radiation could disrupt the cells and cause genetic disruption in the cells and cellular damage. This leads to increased risk for cancers in the lungs, liver and bone.

Stop Work Order

The Hanford Atomic Metal Trades Council (HAMTC) on Aug. 11, 2017 issued a Stop Work order for any open air demolition work at the PFP.

The council, which includes USW Local 12-369 and other building trades locals as members, met with CH2M and agreed to resume demolition preparation work inside and around the plant. However, debris and waste removal from prior demolition activities can be done only during off-shift hours. New demolition work can be resumed if the current safety boundary around the demolition area is expanded 150 feet.

Over the next few weeks, CH2M will move existing workers, equipment and personnel trailers to outside of the new boundary.

Hanford has been plagued with problems since the beginning in 1943 when it began producing plutonium for the secret Manhattan Project and then the nation’s nuclear stockpile during the Cold War. For 40 years workers produced plutonium buttons for nuclear warheads inside the PFP.

Cleanup of the site began in 1988. It is considered the most contaminated place in the Western Hemisphere, and is the DOE’s most complex and difficult cleanup job.

Local Union Leaders Seek Additional Training Opportunities for Membership

By Mike Gill

USW members in the atomic sector handle some of the most hazardous and toxic material on the planet. For them, health and safety training is especially crucial.

Last March, local union leaders from the USW’s atomic sector learned about the training opportunities offered through the Tony Mazzocchi Center’s (TMC) grant program.

The one-day session at Pittsburgh headquarters included an analysis of each atomic site’s training needs, a discussion on worker-trainers, and a compilation of training ideas to form a work plan of action.

International Vice President Carol Landry opened the event, and challenged the group to seek additional opportunities for advancing the knowledge and activism of their members through the use of grant funding.

“The grant funding provides our members with the tools they need to ensure their working conditions are safe, and gives them the ability to speak up effectively when they see job hazards,” Landry said.
Classes Available Under TMC Grant Program

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Much discussion centered on evaluating the training needs at each site, connecting it with local safety and health activities, and exploring ideas on how the grant program can support the needs assessment.

Classes Offered

The group reviewed all the classes currently available under the grant program, including those taught by TMC worker trainers and approved subject matter experts. Participants also suggested training ideas.

They also reviewed and corrected the current list of active DOE worker trainers. Plus, they suggested that additional trainers should be considered, existing trainers mentored and interest in training promoted among new workers and members.

Throughout the meeting the TMC committed to follow up on the ideas raised, which ranged from providing an industrial hygiene class to offering college credit and certification for courses.

The meeting ended with an overview of the DOE trainers’

Training Vital to Stemming Brain Drain at DOE Sites

In the next five to 10 years it is estimated that the U.S. nuclear sector will lose the skills and talents of 80 percent of its workforce as people retire. New hires will need adequate job and health and safety training.

Members of the USW’s Atomic Energy Workers Council (AEWC) discussed these training needs extensively at their biannual meeting March 5-7 in Washington, D.C. They spoke about problems with existing training, roadblocks to adequate training and the possibilities for creating new learning opportunities.

“No one at the Department of Energy (DOE) seems to be coordinating training,” said USW International Vice President Carol Landry. “By the time everyone realizes what is going on we’re going to be in a crisis at these sites, and these aren’t jobs you can just walk into. You need skills.”

Mari-Jo Campagnone, director of the Office of Outreach and Analysis for DOE’s Office of Enterprise Assessments, spoke to the council about the importance of worker skills, the skills gap and how the skills in a technical workforce help grow the Middle Class.

Skilled Workers Needed

“If you really want a manufacturing base and to rebuild your infrastructure, you need skilled craft workers,” she said.

Local 12-652 member Ryan Christensen, who works at Idaho National Laboratory (INL), commented that his local has watched the depletion of technical workers at his site.

“Since 2005, we’ve lost 42-43% of the skilled workforce and see their work being outsourced. These contractors don’t have the same level of skills,” he said.

Local 689 President Herman Potter, from the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Ohio, recalled how he underwent 52 weeks of training when he was an operator and that there had been an in-house training program.

USW Steps In

Grant money is available to help the atomic locals become the preferred source of training at their sites, not only for health and safety, but for job training as well due to the unique hazards existing at these sites, said Mike Gill, grant program director at The Tony Mazzocchi Center for Health, Safety and Environmental Education (TMC).

Some funds are used for peer training. Local 689 conducted a training program for people interested in becoming radiological control technicians (RCTs), and worked with the City of Piketon, Ohio, to provide classroom space. The local also entered into an agreement with the city to provide training for the community. TMC will conduct the instruction, and the city (continued on page 4)
Atomic Locals Engage in Job Training

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will provide the facility and recruitment of training candidates.

Potter is working on a nuclear training program for other technical positions as well. He promoted training when he lobbied Congress after the end of the AEWC meeting.

“At the Tony Mazzocchi Center, the trainings we can provide help members recognize hazards and be a positive part of the health and safety programs at the sites,” Gill said. “Members in right-to-work states gain more recognition on the value of a union and what it does for them through these trainings.”

He said the TMC’s HAZWOPER training is recognized and accepted throughout the (DOE) complex.

TMC trains members on their workplace rights and what management’s responsibilities are under OSHA and other legally binding obligations. It is the employer’s responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace.

Having USW Representation Pays at Honeywell Metropolis Plant

Six USW Local 7-669 production operators slated for possible layoff last March are still employed at the Honeywell Metropolis Works plant.

The company announced last January that it planned to terminate 69 employees at its Metropolis, Ill., facility in March because of market conditions. Honeywell laid off 15 salaried employees and 47 contractors, but the union workers are still there as of press time.

“As long as there is training and a need for labor, the company is keeping us,” said Local 7-669 President Lorenzo Goodman. “Our number one goal is to keep all of our members employed and the community safe.”

Honeywell converts uranium ore into uranium hexafluoride (UF6). UF6 is used to produce enriched uranium for use as fuel in nuclear power plants. The company said it needed the layoffs to reduce production and align its UF6 supply with the demand from its nuclear fuel customers.

Demand for uranium and nuclear fuel began falling after the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan. However, the market could pick up with 57 reactors currently under construction outside the U.S., the restart of Japan’s nuclear units, and the need for a reliable source of power to help meet a projected 50 percent increase in electricity demand over the next 20 years.

Honeywell Contracts Ratified

Last February, Teamsters Local 1145 members approved a four-year agreement covering 1,000 workers at four Twin Cities plants in Minnesota.

Wage increases were 2.5 percent the first and second years; 2 percent the third year, and 1.5 percent the fourth year. The agreement also included a $2,000 signing bonus toward employee health care expenses; added paid sick days; preservation of the seniority clause in layoffs, and continuation of retiree health care up to age 65 until Jan.1, 2018.

The contract also contained a pension freeze. Both parties agreed to work on reducing mandatory overtime.

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 9, representing 317 employees, at Honeywell’s South Bend, Ind., plant and UAW Local 1508, representing 41 employees, at the Green Island, N.Y., plant ratified a five-year agreement in February that ended a lockout lasting almost 10 months.

To end the lockout, the members agreed to health care and pension changes.

Honeywell moved employees to a new health care plan with high deductibles. In 2017, individuals paid $1,500 and families paid $3,000 in medical plan deductibles.

Those hired after May 4, 2016 will not receive pension benefits. The company froze pension contributions during the lockout and continued this through the end of May.

The agreement also included wage increases and additional vacation days for employees with three or more years of service.

USW Atomic Energy Workers Council from the meeting last spring in the USW’s Legislative Department office in Washington, D.C.