

A National Scandal

A Conversation With Anthony Mazzocchi

A governmental report prepared by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, then headed by Elliot L. Richardson, brought to the attention of the American public a number of facts many of us unfortunately have not known. The report, entitled "The President's Report on Occupational Health and Safety," cited recent estimates that indicate there are at least 390,000 new cases of industrial disease in this country each year and that there may be as many as 100,000 deaths a year from occupationally caused diseases. The following conversation with Anthony Mazzocchi, Director of the Citizen Legislative Department of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, focuses on this issue. Mr. Mazzocchi has an international reputation for his efforts to improve the health and safety of working men and women. The conversation is an edited version of an interview originally conducted by Paul H. Sherry on the "Always on Sunday" radio program sponsored by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. Dr. Sherry is Executive Associate for Planning and Strategy with the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and editor of the Journal of Current Social Issues.

PAUL H. SHERRY: Mr. Mazzocchi, can you give some specific facts in "The President's Report on Occupational Health and Safety" that document the hazardous conditions of workers in this country?

ANTHONY MAZZOCCHI: Statistics in the field of occupational health and safety are extremely conservative. The fact is that one does not know how many American workers die of occupationally related diseases, because no one really counts. The fact that the President's report cites the figure 100,000 is an incredible indictment of the industrial system. If these workers were reported on each day as being killed on the job, I don't think the American people would stand for it. You're talking about 100,000 people! There has not been a war in American history that ever had a casualty ratio of 100,000 men killed in any single year, not in the history of the United States. The report addresses itself to the surface of a major problem that's an inextricable part of our industrial society.

SHERRY: As I understand it, many of the diseases have a fairly long-time line so that the effects of exposure may not become visible until ten to twenty years later. Thus, unless careful statistics are kept, people will not see the causal relationships.

MAZZOCCHI: That's correct. Cancer occurs, and people feel they were struck by the law of random chance. The fact of the matter is that 90 per cent of cancer is environmentally induced.

SHERRY: You say that 90 per cent of cancer is environmentally caused. How much of that 90 per cent is caused by where one lives and how much by where one works?

MAZZOCCHI: I don't have the scientific tools to make that estimate, nor do I think anyone else has, but they're closely interrelated. Where you live is an essential question. For instance, take the George Washington Apartments in New York City. Hundreds of thousands of cars pass underneath those apartments daily. We know that the carbon monoxide count in those apartments is excessive, above the amount considered to be detrimental to a person's health. If you live next to the Long Island Expressway, you're in the same sort of situation. What comes out of the tailpipe of a car can be a crucial factor in causing increased morbidity. The pollutants at the industrial workplace produce a highly concentrated version of the same problem.

SHERRY: I talked recently to someone in industry who has been involved in occupational safety concerns for a number of years. He said that though occupational health has indeed been a major problem in the past, now that the Occupational Health and Safety Act, enacted in 1970, is on the books the problem has been significantly minimized. Do you share this opinion?

MAZZOCCHI: Absolutely not. In fact, that's part of the mythology that industrialists have perpetrated on the people. The workplace environment is worse now than at any time in our history, simply because technology is at the point where we're starting to see the effects of what we produce. Dr. Irving J. Selicoff, head of the Division of Environmental Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, states that we're now seeing the first victims of our entry into the age of plastics. We entered this age approximately thirty years ago. We're now seeing, for instance, vinyl chloride disease, the rarest form of cancer, occurring in workers. Hemoangiosarcoma of the liver is a cancer that normally occurs once in 78,000 deaths. In one of the plants where we represent workers, we find one in eight deaths, truly an astounding figure. One in two asbestos workers may die of an asbestos-related cancer. We're now seeing for the first time the victims who were exposed twenty to thirty years ago to these carcinogenic substances. I fear for a whole generation of children that has grown up in this period of time. When this particular generation of children starts reaching twenty to thirty years of age, we may see an incredible disaster.

SHERRY: I want to return to your figures on asbestos. Are you saying that one out of two asbestos workers may die of cancer-related disease?

MAZZOCCHI: That's asbestos insulators. One of every two deaths is cancer-related from asbestos.

SHERRY: There have been studies documenting this?

MAZZOCCHI: Yes. Dr. Selicoff's studies are unavailable in this respect.

SHERRY: The 1970 act was designed to cover many of the concerns you are addressing. Why is that not happening?

MAZZOCCHI: Like most laws it's a promise of protection, but when one looks at its implementation you deal with the illusion. Look at the mathematics of the law. Fifty-five million workers are covered by the law; 4.1 million workplaces are covered by the law. We may have up to a thousand inspectors shortly. If each inspector covered a workplace in a day—which is an impossibility, because many workplaces require months to properly inspect—it would be twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, up to a hundred years before they could visit the same workplace twice. Many, many more inspectors and industrial hygiene people are needed to protect people adequately than are provided by the law. One hundred million dollars, which is actually peanuts, to protect fifty million workers! That's equivalent to the sum spent by the armed forces for their recruiting on radio and television. That's the line budget. When you consider that we're building a Trident submarine for a billion dollars, supposedly to enhance our security, at the same time that a minimum of the thousand workers are dying of occupationally related diseases, I'd suggest our priorities are awfully jumbled.

SHERRY: You mentioned that the situation for the

worker today is actually worse than it has been previously. What improvements have there been?

MAZZOCCHI: Well, workers are much more perceptive than previously. They're much more demanding about protection from the obvious physical hazards that exist in the workplace, so that is an improvement. But they know nothing about the environment of the workplace. An accurate description of the workplace is that we work with over 15,000 chemicals. These chemicals aren't identified by their generic name in a workplace. A worker takes a job in a plant that's using chemicals, or other substances, and he knows nothing about what he uses. He assumes someone has looked into it, but that's often a misplaced faith. The fact is, the substances are coded. They're introduced without any pretesting. We're fighting for pretesting of new chemicals, but that doesn't exist at present.

SHERRY: Are you saying that chemicals can now be placed on the market before they're tested?

MAZZOCCHI: Of course.

SHERRY: So that many chemicals highly detrimental to human beings are now being used without any testing required?

MAZZOCCHI: Right. Workers are guinea pigs. Everything we know about the toxicity of most of these substances is a result of using the body-in-the-morgue method. We see a worker die. Someone makes a correlation that what they were working with caused his death, and then we back up, rather than using laboratory animals initially before we introduce these particular substances. Vinyl chloride is a classic case where there's been a suspicion now for four or five years that it causes cancer of the liver. The industry was aware of this because they financed studies in Italy—the Viola and Maltoni studies—and they're aware that there was cancer in mice in 1970 as a result of vinyl chloride inhalation. Nothing was disclosed to the intended victim: the American worker. Dr. Creech in Louisville discovered eight deaths sometime back in February, 1974. He announced it publicly, and then the whole vinyl chloride story began to unfold. We're now seeing that this may be another disaster similar to asbestos, or worse, because we see that vinyl chloride may affect an unborn generation by way of broken chromosomes.

SHERRY: You mentioned asbestos and vinyl chloride. What are some of the other more dangerous toxic substances?

MAZZOCCHI: There are so many thousand substances I could not begin to enumerate them. Recently we heard about arsenic being a cancer inducer. When that story broke, we checked the literature. In *Hunter's Diseases of the Occupations* published in 1880 arsenic was listed as a cause of lung cancer. It's absolutely criminal that members of the industrial-scientific community are frivolous in the uses of these substances and do not divulge all that is known about these particular substances.

SHERRY: Do they not divulge the information because they want to maximize profit? Is it as cynical as

that?

MAZZOCCHI: I would hold that that's the problem. Essentially, if you look at what we produce in our society and the manner in which we produce it, when industry is aware there may be a risk, they don't disclose this risk for fear it will affect the end product. Many of the things we use should not have been introduced in the first place. Further, we know that there are hazards not only in the manufacture of the items, but in the actual use and disposal of the items.

SHERRY: How aware are workers of the hazardous conditions in which they're working?

MAZZOCCHI: Two things. They have vague suspicions that some of the things they smell in a workplace might be hazardous. They see growing illness. It's an empirical method. However, they have really no options. There's no place for them to go. So you leave one particular rotten factory to get a job in another rotten factory. But the substances are so pervasive in the American workplace that even people who work in a retail establishment and feel they're not exposed to these things turn around and find they might be using a solvent or some other substance that might affect them and others around them.

SHERRY: I was interested in a recent statement by Sheldon W. Samuels, Director of Occupational Health, Safety, and Environmental Affairs of the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department. He said that nearly half of the male blue-collar work force is afflicted with chronic work-related diseases. That kind of blows the mind, the unhealthy conditions under which our men and women are working.

MAZZOCCHI: There's no question about it. Life is growing shorter as a result of the use of these particular substances. The disease ratio is growing. It's absolutely mad, for example, to talk about a war on cancer when we ought to look at what causes cancer. Since we know that at least 90 per cent of it is environmentally induced, if we had environmental controls we could prevent most of the cancer that afflicts us.

SHERRY: One of the more well-known situations involving industrial hazards involved a factory run by the Pittsburgh Corning Corporation in Tyler, Texas. Can you describe that situation for us, because I think it telescopes the problem we have.

MAZZOCCHI: Yes, I think so too. It is an incredible tale. The Pittsburgh Corning story starts in Paterson, New Jersey. The Paterson plant produced asbestos for the defense effort in World War II. It was moved to Tyler, Texas, and purchased by Pittsburgh Corning in 1962. The plant was producing asbestos primarily for use in submarines. The company became aware of elevated air counts of asbestos fibers in the plant's environment. The federal government also became aware of these elevated air counts. As a result of Dr. Selicoff's studies, it was known that the workers would get cancer if they continued to work in this unhealthy environment.

SHERRY: This is about 1971 or 1972?

MAZZOCCHI: Yes, from the sixties into the seventies the federal government had inspected the plant, but as the federal government so often does, it didn't tell the intended victims. The inspectors only relayed their information to the company. The company's own industrial hygiene department relayed the information to their corporate medical director. Nothing was done about it during this period. I once gave a lecture to a group of young doctors at the School of Public Health at Harvard. I related a number of the tales I'm relating to you. One of the young doctors subsequently went to work for the federal government. After working there a very short time he uncovered the Tyler Story, packed it up in a package, and sent it to me. A real Pentagon Papers situation. We made the knowledge public and accused the federal government and the company of suppressing a situation that was going to cause the death of many men. The upshot is that the plant is now closed. The plant physically has been buried. They buried every bit of machinery at that plant.

SHERRY: The company did that to hide the evidence?

MAZZOCCHI: No, not to hide the evidence. The contamination was so bad they had to do it. Now epidemiologists estimate that between 35 and 40 per cent of the men will die of cancer. Out of 825 men who passed through that plant, approximately 350 or 400 men will die of cancer. A very horrible form of cancer from asbestos. That's an incredible massacre. We have immortalized Custer for being where he shouldn't have been. Here you have a modern-day massacre of American working people, and had it not been for *New Yorker* magazine and Paul Brodeur's investigative reporting, this story would not be known outside of union circles. It is typical of what's happening in many places. The federal government never told one single worker what was happening to him. The company expected, I guess, that the workers would go away and die silently without any complaints. That's precisely what's happening. The workers did not associate their disease with their work.

SHERRY: Asbestos, as I understand it, can be carried on the worker's clothing back to their families.

MAZZOCCHI: Absolutely.

SHERRY: What kind of suffering would you project for the families of those workers?

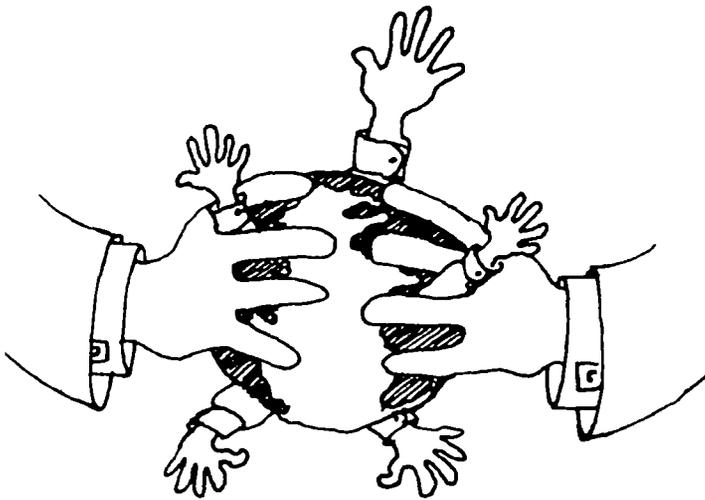
MAZZOCCHI: Dr. Selicoff has done some work on this. He has studied the workers and the workers' families at Paterson. I am not prepared to repeat the estimate of disease he has found in family members of workers who've worked in the asbestos industry, but we do know, for instance, that some people who lived in the vicinity of the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II are now coming down with cancer induced by the asbestos fibers that become airborne and got into the community environment. This happened around many shipbuilding centers in World War II, where they used great amounts of asbestos.

SHERRY: Tell us about the Kawecki-Berylco Industries Plant in Hazelton, Pennsylvania.

MAZZOCCHI: That's an incredible tale. This is a plant that manufactures beryllium, an exotic metal used in the space and defense programs. It's used as brake linings on aircraft, in hydrogen atomic weapons, and on space capsules. The milling of this metal is highly dangerous. We know a great deal about it. It causes a disease known as berylliosis. It's a debilitating disease. You die a very horrible death. I've watched victims of this disease, and it's an appalling sight. The plant was built in Hazelton, Pennsylvania, which is a depressed strip mining community. Workers there who were ex-miners were very happy to get this particular job. We organized the plant a few years back and we had a commitment to the workers that we would look into the problem of beryllium-related diseases. The company contended that there was no beryllium-related disease, that the workers' illness was really miner's asthma.

SHERRY: They wouldn't acknowledge the problem?

MAZZOCCHI: No, they never even acknowledged the berylliosis victims in that plant. They maintained that you had to be susceptible to berylliosis in order to



Janice Stapleton

contract it, which was contrary to the research we had conducted. I went to a union meeting in Hazelton where the workers unfolded this tale. I tape recorded the meeting. I brought the tape to Dr. Harriet Hardy, a leading occupational health specialist in beryllium at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who was appalled at what she heard. She recommended an industrial hygienist by the name of Dick Chamberlin. We brought him in as our consultant to work with us, and he completely demolished the company data. We also brought in a leading doctor from Massachusetts General Hospital, Dr. Kazemi, one of the few people who know how to diagnose the disease. We sent workers up to Massachusetts General Hospital, and Kazemi found,

I think, six or seven cases of berylliosis. We found some precursors of berylliosis. We had to monitor the men very carefully. We engaged in a three-year struggle in that plant. Today it's a much improved facility. The workers do their own monitoring. We receive all the data. We use our own doctors to do the diagnosis of the disease. The fact of the matter was that in Hazelton not a single doctor had diagnosed the disease. Not a single attorney was willing to pursue a workmen's compensation case. The entire professional community was colonized by the company. That happens frequently in these small towns. Workers have no options.

SHERRY: You mean many of the doctors and lawyers are part of the corporate structure?

MAZZOCCHI: The doctor was one of the chief stockholders in the company. The attorney handling one of the compensation cases that never came to fruition was head of the Bar Association and the Chamber of Commerce. He was responsible for inviting that company to town. Other lawyers who attempted to take the cases were urged off taking them. The workers were trapped in this small colony in Hazelton, so we had to bring in people from the outside, from MIT and Massachusetts General Hospital. Because of our efforts the company has hired our consultant, whom we trust implicitly, to be the consultant for that facility. He tells both us and the company what the facts are, and we act upon them independently.

SHERRY: What can a depressed community like Hazelton do? It needs industry in order to support its work force, yet obviously it doesn't want to bring in an industry that is going to destroy the lives of its people.

MAZZOCCHI: I think it's beyond the scope of any individual community to address the problem. It requires a national solution. The law should apply equally across the land, so one community does not become the repository of every hazardous industry around. But essentially workers will have to do this themselves. The law will not do it for them. The fact of the matter is that only 25 per cent of the American work force is organized. The unorganized worker doesn't stand a chance. He can't even use the law effectively. He must be organized in order to protect himself. He has to make demands of an employer. First of all, the right to know is essential. Every worker should know every substance he works with. It should be described to him in detail, what the hazards are, how much of the toxic material is present in a plant environment, what precautionary measures must be taken in order to protect himself. This is not done. The overwhelming majority of workers do not know what they work with.

SHERRY: I'd like to quote a statement by Paul Brodeur on the so-called "medical-industrial complex" and ask you to comment. Mr. Brodeur states that this so-called complex seems to be involved in "nothing less than a blatant and pervasive effort to suppress and ignore medical information concerning

toxic substances that are estimated to be killing 100,000 workers a year and to prevent any effective enforcement of the Occupational Health and Safety Act." You have already indicated that certain industries are acting irresponsibly. Do you agree that there is a heavy involvement on the part of certain areas of the medical profession?

MAZZOCCHI: Certainly the medical professionals who work for corporations are more interested in the health of the corporation than the health of the worker. There was a doctor by the name of Ramazzini who lived in the seventeenth century. He admonished all doctors to ask the patient what his occupation was. To this day doctors still do not ask that very essential question. The average community doctor is not part of the conspiracy. But there has been this conspiracy on the part of the industrial-medical complex to withhold information.

SHERRY: What are some things a person can do to make certain that doctors act responsibly?

MAZZOCCHI: That's fairly difficult because the doctor is a member of a corporate establishment. He's an employee and a tool of the establishment. I think our drive should not be against the corporate medical establishment but against the corporation. The corporation has a responsibility to provide a safe and healthful working place. We must extract that concession. The law is not going to do it for us. Let me cite one example of that. Recently we had a fatality—we have a number of fatalities weekly among people we represent in our union—of a worker who worked for a major oil company whose name you would recognize. It cost the local union more money to purchase the inspector's report than the company was fined for the fatality itself. So, you see, with that type of problem, we cannot depend upon the law. The average fine has been \$20 or \$30.

SHERRY: Only \$20 or \$30?

MAZZOCCHI: In fact, I saw some figures where it's probably a little less. You're talking about the Standard Oils, the Union Carbides, major corporations. You're not talking about mama and papa's little cleaning shop down the corner. The fine is not going to do it. The law is an important tool. It dramatizes the

problem. But workers through their own collective instruments must bring about change.

SHERRY: To what degree can workers count on federal regulatory agencies for help?

MAZZOCCHI: Well, most regulatory agencies are dominated by the people who are supposed to be regulated. That's the history of regulatory agencies in our country. The record speaks for itself. They're there to promote the industry, and they're there to downplay the hazards.

SHERRY: What can be done about this?

MAZZOCCHI: We have to demand information constantly. I don't ask you to accept what I am saying as gospel. Find out for yourself. We have to start asking questions about the workplace, of the federal government, and of any federal agency. The right to know is crucial.

SHERRY: What groups in addition to the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union are working to reduce industrial hazards?

MAZZOCCHI: The Ralph Nader Research Group is very active on worker safety. We've been working very closely with them. The United Rubber Workers are very active. We have now begun to work with European and Asian unions on this question. For instance, for dealing with vinyl chloride we are attempting, along with trade unions of sixty-five different countries, to take a uniform stand on creation of a standard. We're dealing with multinational corporations. What they can't get away with in one place they attempt to get away with in another. We need a uniform approach.

SHERRY: What are some resources people can look to to find out more about industrial safety?

MAZZOCCHI: There's very little literature. I would certainly recommend the Paul Brodeur articles, now published in book form by Viking Press entitled *Expendable Americans*. Rachel Scott's new book, *Muscle and Blood*, is another. *Work is Dangerous to Your Health* by Dr. Jeanne Stellman and Dr. Susan Davin is a third. It really isn't necessary for thousands of people each year to die from occupationally related diseases, but unless something is done about it they will.