

Eight Years on and 9/11 Clean-up Workers Still Coughing

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Marina Cuniga, a speaker at a rally in lower Manhattan on Oct. 21, was a cleanup worker at the World Trade Center site and says she has not recovered from the ill effects of the inhaling poisonous dust. (Matthew Robertson/The Epoch Times)

NEW YORK—It was the benzene from the burning jet fuel, mercury from the smashed fluorescent lighting, lead from the computers, and dioxins from the smoldering plastics that helped create the poisonous cocktail of dust that blanketed lower Manhattan in the days and weeks following the 9/11 disaster, according to Esther Regelson, a local resident and board member of 9/11 Environmental Action.

Her group, part of a coalition committed to the health of post 9-11 workers, gathered for a rally in Liberty Plaza on Wednesday. Workers and residents who had inhaled toxic dust from the collapsing towers of Sept. 11, 2001 held placards in three

languages, demanding health care and compensation.

The theme of the event was the publication of a new survey, conducted by the 9/11 EA and Beyond Ground Zero groups, of 200 persons afflicted from 9/11 exposure. Many of them report being chronically ill, only five percent said they had recovered, and one-third saw no improvement. The survey calls attention to the lack of official oversight into those with apparent 9/11 induced health problems, particularly those who are not included in government initiatives.

Fully understanding the range and extent of the different health impacts for different groups is a tangled process which has not been given enough resources, organizers say.

The health problems of the first responders to 9/11 have been acknowledged by experts, but the scope of the afflicted is greater than that, they said.

For example, studies conducted by Mount Sinai Hospital-based researchers acknowledge that the effect on the human body of breathing in the combinations of dangerous chemicals sent into the air on 9/11 is an understudied field in medicine. The researchers write that such exposure may have "new and unexpected health effects."

Some of those who identify as among the afflicted shared their stories at the rally. Mariana Cuniga was one of the cleanup workers, among the hundreds brought in three days after the disaster to start vacuuming and getting rid of the dust. They worked 16 hours a day, seven days a week for Maxons Restorations, one of the subcontractors, she said.

For the first two months they were provided no gloves, masks, or protective equipment. They also drank water contaminated with the same dust, she said.

"I can't concentrate well, can't sleep well, I'm very depressed, and of all my friends one has died and one is very sick," she said after the rally.

"Eight years after the disaster we're all now very sick. We have different problems, but we're all sick and can't work ... No one is taking care of the problems that are afflicting us," she explained. "We cleaned the whole disaster area, now they've forgotten about us."

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She said that she and her friends started to feel that things weren't quite right with their health in 2002 and 2003, but that the problems became more pronounced as time passed, and adequate treatment has not been provided.

Mariana said that her friend Marta Freire from Ecuador was put into hospital in 2007 and diagnosed with thyroid cancer; she was apparently still too sick to attend the rally.

Hospitals set up by a government-funded treatment and study program, including at Bellevue, Gouverneur, and Elmhurst, only treat certain symptoms currently identified as 9/11 related.

This neglects others, like cancer or neurological illnesses, said Kimberly Flynn, who helped write the survey and report. "Bellevue has to shove them over to some other place because Bellevue can't treat them for that."

Beside the limited scope of treatment, many of those identified as victims of the toxic dust, according to the survey, are unaware of the free government services anyway, and instead visit private doctors.

Zhang Xiaozhong, a chef, said he was one of them, and was unsatisfied with the result. He says he was exposed to pollutants from 9/11 while at the Jing Hua restaurant on East Broadway in Chinatown, where he works. "I went to the doctor, but he thought the symptoms weren't brought about by 9/11. He treated it as just a regular cough, or an inflamed throat," he said.

"But ever since 9/11 I've had a long period of time every year coughing, inflammation, and the doctor's medicine has no effect."

His child, two at the time, now also has respiratory problems, he said.

Zhang acknowledged that causality between the symptoms and inhalation of poisonous substances from the 9/11 disaster may be hard to fully prove.

"We know after it happened though," he said. "We didn't have these problems before."

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