

Hundreds rally for health care for 9/11 workers

Six years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center, rescue and recovery workers affected by the toxic fallout still have not gotten the medical or financial help they need

By JAMES PARKS

While more than 600 union members were killed on Sept. 11, thousands more who worked in the rubble of the collapsed buildings are at risk for chronic diseases.

Workers like Eduardo Torres, a member of Plumbers Local 14 in New Jersey, who helped clean up Ground Zero and has developed chronic respiratory disease because of his exposure to toxic chemicals in the air around the site. He told a Sept. 10 press conference in Piscataway, N.J.:

“Staying home and watching the aftermath of these cowardly attacks from the comfort of my living room never entered my mind. Even had I anticipated the ailments I would face as a result of my involvement at Ground Zero, I don’t think it would have changed my decision to respond. I hope the federal government will step up to the plate and provide the resources for the care and monitoring we need.”

New Jersey State AFL-CIO President Charles Wowkanech said President Bush “has turned his back on workers many times during his time in the White House. However, of all the issues he has been wrong on, his failure to adequately provide for the brave men and women that gave so much of themselves at a dark time for America is disgusting.”

On Sept. 8, hundreds of working families in New York joined with elected officials, first responders, com-

munity organizers and religious leaders to rally and say it’s past time to take care of the heroes like Torres who risked their lives six years ago and are now struggling with disease. The rally, which commemorated both Labor Day and the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, drew attention to the bipartisan 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, which Reps. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and Vito Fossella (R-N.Y.) introduced Sept. 11.

The bill would provide comprehensive long-term medical coverage and financial compensation for anyone exposed to the toxic dust and debris of Ground Zero. Rescue and recovery workers, their unions, health care advocates and survivors and their families have long said there is a deadly link between the poisonous Ground Zero rubble and the debilitating illnesses — and in some cases deaths — of those exposed. They say federal funding delays and poor organization led to the failure of various federal health agencies to respond fully to the workers’ needs.

The AFL-CIO reported that for the first time, the death of a survivor of the Sept. 11 attacks was officially linked to exposure to the toxic material at Ground Zero.

Rep. Nadler lays the blame on the government. “Government officials at all levels took perilous shortcuts on workers’ safety,” Nadler said. “Many of you toiled for months on that toxic pile at Ground Zero without proper protection. You were unnecessarily exposed to hazardous toxins because of what the government officials said and did.”

New York State AFL-CIO President Denis Hughes said “the time is now for a comprehensive, long-term commitment from Washington that addresses the ongoing medical monitoring, compensation and treatment needs of our Sept. 11 heroes.”

“Six years ago, these heroes

showed the whole world how they respond to emergencies. Now it is our turn,” he added.

Gary La Barbera, president of the New York City Central Labor Council, said at the rally, “We will never forget those who gave their lives on 9/11. We will never forget those who lost their lives on 9/11. And we will never forget those who are still suffering from the effects of 9/11.”

The legislation would cover first responders, rescue workers, construction workers and volunteers who pitched in during the nine-month cleanup at the site. Residents, students, office workers and others who were in Lower Manhattan on 9/11 also would be eligible to receive health monitoring, treatment for con-

ditions that can be linked to dust exposure and compensation for jobs that were lost or other financial setbacks caused by those illnesses. Under the proposed bill, Ground Zero health programs would be included in the federal budget on a regular basis.

Robin Herbert, director of the World Trade Center monitoring and treatment program based at Mount Sinai Medical Center, told The New York Times about four in 10 of its patients have had breathing problems, including asthma, and many suffer mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

A task force appointed by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (I) estimated that as many as 400,000 people might have been exposed to

dust from the collapsed World Trade Center.

Rep. Fossella summed up the feeling of the day when he said: “We have a solemn responsibility to the unsung heroes of 9/11 who were exposed to the air over Ground Zero. These men and women risked their own lives and safety when New York and our nation needed them most. We must support our unsung heroes and make sure that they, too, are not forgotten.”

The national AFL-CIO Executive Council has urged Congress to act immediately to address the pressing health needs of workers exposed to Ground Zero toxic substances.

(Editor’s Note: James Parks writes for the national AFL-CIONow blog.)

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