PCB mishap leaves uneasiness

By MARCIA COHEN
New York Daily News

BINGHAMTON, N.Y. — An 18-story building on Hawley Street in this upstate New York city is eerily quiet, peopled only by creatures wearing yellow suits, goggles and breathing equipment, prowling empty offices and corridors with weapons against a mysterious enemy.

A clock on the sixth floor has stopped at 5:34.

The multimillion-dollar building, property of New York State and proudly dedicated nine years ago, is devoid of the hustle and bustle of government bureaucracy.

At 5:34 a.m. on Feb. 5, a fire — cause unknown — broke out in a basement utility room, cutting off all power and — in a chain effect that has not yet been fully explained — spewing PCB-laden soot throughout the building.

POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS are known to cause cancer, liver disease and reproductive problems in laboratory animals, and skin rashes in humans.

It has not been determined exactly how dangerous PCBs are to humans, or in what quantities and under what conditions a danger exists. It is thought that exposure to PCBs may produce a higher than normal incidence of cancer in humans over a period of years.

The building, which dominates the Binghamton skyline, was closed shortly after the fire was discovered. Health officials launched an extensive cleanup. Goldfish, plants, coffeepots and other office paraphernalia — all dusted with toxic soot — was discarded.

THE PCB CONTAMINATION — believed to be the first such mishap in an office building in the nation — generated a nervous storm of conflicting opinions in Binghamton, 180 miles northwest of New York City.

"We're all going to be pretty skeptical about moving back in there," says Robert E. Leamer, counsel to State Assemblyman James Tallon. Tallon's office, along with those of the rest of the state employes, has been temporarily relocated nearby.

"Unless they gut the building, we'd run the risk of opening a drawer that wasn't cleaned properly and ending up with a skin rash," Leamer says. "And what will they do with things like the hundreds of IBM typewriters that cost about $800 each? Can you clean them or do you have to throw them out?"

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ORIGINAL REPORTS blamed the contamination on a rupture in the basement of two transformers which were cooled by a solution containing PCBs. A thousand gallons of the coolant was reported to have been spewed into the utility room, where it burned. The ventilation system then supposedly picked up the toxic ash and distributed it throughout the building.

The latest report, from the New York State Office of General Services, stated that 180 — not 1,000 — gallons of the coolant had been spilled. It said a fire in an electrical switching panel damaged a transformer, allowing the coolant to leak out.

Another report, from General Electric, which manufactured the transformers and is now charged with repairing them, contended the transformers did not rupture and that the fire occurred in the ventilation system.

Meanwhile the cleanup continues. About 30 people vacuum and scrub floors and walls with detergent.

The workers, as well as anyone else who enters the building, wear yellow protective suits, boots, goggles and respirators that are discarded as soon as they leave.

THE LOCAL health commissioner, Dr. Arnold Schecter, is far from satisfied with the cleanup. He would like the operation halted until a group of experts from around the country have convened and new procedures are established.

He complains that no showers were available when he left the building after a recent inspection and that his shoes may have left particles of toxic chemicals that could be released into community air.

For the time being, some of the government files in the building can be released. State employes struggle with the problems created by this loss of records.

The Worker's Compensation Board, for instance, handles 1,300 active cases. It has decided to issue emergency information cards, then try to get the insurance companies to reconstruct each case.

"The work involved is mind-boggling," says one official.

30 cross picket lines at Terre Haute paper

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. — (AP) — Thirty new employes of the Terre Haute Tribune-Star Publishing Co. crossed picket lines to help put out an eight-section, 168-page combined Saturday-Sunday edition, company officials said.

The workers, mostly college students, wrote, edited, typeset, pasted pages and ran circulation and advertising departments, John C. Schweitzer, the company's general manager, said.

Officials for the Newspaper Guild Local 46 called the hiring "scab labor."

The paper's truck drivers, members of the Teamsters Local 144, walked off the job Feb. 21, charging management had failed to negotiate a three-year contract in good faith. Their picket lines are being honored by three of the four other unions working for the company. The job action has stripped the newspaper to only 30 managers and press operators from the normal

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