

Remarks of Jacob Clayman
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International
Working Group on Vinyl Chloride
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When philosophers and scientists speculate on the future, no one really expects a surge of interest to be generated, certainly not a call for action. In our problem-oriented society, the short-term has priority over the long. In government, in our institutions, in industry and in the family of organized labor, we move from crisis to crisis, never stopping long enough to change the conditions and circumstances from which these crises arise.

Health and environment, in the workplace or in the community, pose no exceptions. We have been told of the dangers of our increasingly synthetic world for over a half century -- and of some of the traditional hazards of the workplace since the beginnings of the industrial revolution. And, to be honest, we have done very little about either. When an episode occurs, of the kind focused upon here, we tend to treat it as if it were one of a kind, as if similar episodes could not occur again.

Fortunately for our children -- but unfortunately for those of us who will die of an environmental disease -- the difference between the short and the long term is collapsing under the weight of predictions-come-true. The crisis we are now faced with is forcing us to radically alter

the conditions for change in our society. We no longer can merely solve the problem of vinyl chloride. We must halt the parade of new environmental diseases, whether they are dread angiosarcomas and mesiotheliomas or as yet unnamed behavioral and neurological syndromes. Within my own lifetime cancer has changed from being one of the least frequent to one of the most frequent causes of death. This is not human progress. It is not a legacy willingly left for my grandchildren to challenge.

Vinyl chloride may pose, as Dr. Lloyd points out in this week's issue of TIME magazine, "the occupational disease of the century" but it also presents us with a case history of why these diseases occur.

Dr. Selikoff reminds us that the toxicity of vinyl chloride was established in the European scientific literature more than a quarter century ago. Even in this country corporate scientists developed information which was not widely or effectively acted upon, 10...15 years ago, by either management or government. Only in very recent years has there been serious investigation of vinyl chloride as a carcinogen. And if it were not the for uniqueness of the tumors produced, as Dr. Epstein noted some months ago, this chemical scourge might still not have broad acceptance as a human carcinogen.

Now at this point I will not make an attack on the callous multinational corporations who ignored and kept secret even the voices of their own indentured scientists. (I'll save that for later.)

To be fair, we ought to ask: Where was labor? What were we doing?

This is really the question asked by the Louisville Times in their editorial of February 28. It deserves an answer.

I cannot speak for the labor movement abroad. But I know what we are doing.

As long ago as a hundred years ago we were fighting in the courts for the right to a safe workplace. Fifty years ago we were struggling to secure Workmen's Compensation laws and arguing with the employers that "safety would pay" because it would cut down on Workmen's Compensation awards. Twenty-five years ago we were still struggling with the medical profession and compensation boards in many states to have silicosis declared a compensable disease. Fifteen years ago we accepted the invitation to collaborate with management in the voluntary safety movement. Five years ago we were still struggling to make our system of

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state enforcement programs work, although the industrial and business power over state legislation foredoomed these efforts.

During that century we bought hundreds of millions of dollars worth of seals and raffle tickets in the march on polio, rheumatism, tuberculosis, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, sickle cell anemia, kidney disease, MD, MS, mental health, etc., etc. We built hundreds of hospitals, sanatoria, and clinics. Like this occasion, gastronomics became a weapon as we organized thousands of luncheons, breakfasts, dinners, brunches, cocktail parties and coffee klatches to plan the stuffing of envelopes, the rolling of bandages and the ringing of doorbells.

In this city, only blocks from here, we passed the hat in filthy, airless sweatshops to collect pennies, nickels, and an occasional dime to fight the Great White Plague. Ironically, some of the funds left over from those days are being donated to the federal government, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, to help finance the study of the new hazards faced by the modern clothing worker. Times haven't really changed.

While some small gains were made, on balance I must tell you that our efforts were much short of great success. But we tried.

As I try to pinpoint the reasons for the failure, I inevitably focus on one fact. We were once an immigrant society with relatively simple and undemanding expectations. The worker in particular accepted a rather subordinate role in the decision-making process. He assumed that someone else would have to do the thinking, the evaluation and choose the course of action. He looked around at the safety posters, he attended committee meetings and rallies for the glory of the hard hat and the fire extinguisher. He accepted designation as the "accident prone" employee who needed psychological reconditioning.

While his lungs were being destroyed, while the valves of his heart were being torn, he tried to believe that someone was really doing something to protect him.

But four years ago our Department had a rank-and-file meeting in Washington where we vowed to end the consequences of society's failures. That meeting lead to the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which went into effect barely three years ago.

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Laws don't solve problems. But they set forth the rules we must all follow in the fight to find solutions.

The key set of rules implied and spelled out in the Act are those that clearly spell out the equal role of the worker or his representative at every stage of the decision-making process. The meaning of those rules for you as medical scientists is that there can be no more secret studies, no more decision-making meetings with government in the absence of worker representatives, no more government-management secrecy pacts on data collection.

When we initiated our campaign to clean up the asbestos industry, despite these new rules there was an attempt to play the game as if the Act had never passed. I thought we had settled that question but our experience in the current vinyl chloride episode leads me to believe that on this point there are still some untutored minds in government and industry.

Multi-corporate studies of cancer from vinyl chloride were initiated secretly in this country and in Europe. They were discussed with the government in secret and their results would probably still be

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a secret without the presence of mass media and if the law did not require the reporting of occupational disease. Even after the Louisville cases were announced, the government attempted to conduct key meetings without the presence of our representatives. In at least one case, in the Union Carbide plant in South Charleston, West Virginia, the government sought to substitute a medical survey of employees by an independent researcher, initiated by the Machinists union, with a study of their own to be conducted -- by secret pre-arrangement -- in collaboration with the company.

Seemingly, to slow down the development of new information, NIOSH is being ordered to request no increases in staff and funds to cope with the additional burden of their vinyl chloride investigation. Because of resources already stretched to the breaking point, in effect, NIOSH is being asked to diminish its total effort. No serious re-programming is taking place at the National Cancer Institute and there are no funds available to the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences to support the work of her sister agency.

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Dr. Wagoner -- for example -- is being forced to delay other equally important investigations.

I am convinced that this effort is unrelated to a tight budget. The funds required are a pittance in terms of the total HEW budget; a few million dollars are required. Research means information and information means regulation. Regulation means corporate expenditures. The equation is rather simple.

The unstinting personal sacrifice of scores of civil servants and commissioned corps officers of the Public Health Service is frustrating this design. It isn't going to work. These men and women are making great personal sacrifices for our members. Our people will take every necessary step to protect and support the civil servants who are trying to do an honest job. They are also being advised about who in the private sector is providing them with necessary professional skills: Selikoff, Nicholson, Lillis, Anderson, Daum, Fishbein, Mancuso, Epstein, Kay, Holaday and dozens of others.

We've come a long way in this country in at least our formal commitment to the preservation of life and health on the job. The passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act was a magnificent episode in our struggle. It is essentially a good law. But it needs implementation.

It needs much more financial support.

It needs many more dedicated public officials.

It needs the continuing support of people of good will, in and out of the labor movement.

And finally it needs the precious skills which you possess.

We appreciate -- more than we can express -- the great contributions of some of you sitting here.

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