Crew opts to disregard PCB danger

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The driver eased his big rig down the long driveway to the Binghamton State Office Building loading dock. A dozen white-suited workers already were loading another truck ahead of his.

He said he was a little nervous because it was his first time to transport hazardous waste. Personally, he'd rather haul steel, but times were tough and you took what you could get.

Both trucks had been hired by a Niagara Falls chemical waste firm. The company operated the only landfill in New York state licensed to accept the PCB-contaminated debris, the residue from a Feb. 5 transformer explosion. The blast and fire spread fumes and ash containing polychlorinated biphenyls — PCBs — throughout the building.

The first tractor-trailer was filled, and the driver pulled the toxic payload onto Isbell Street. The man from New England Pollution Control Co. told the waiting driver his rig would be loaded right after lunch.

It was a warm afternoon last week, and the New England specialists were still cleaning out the basement transformer room. The driver asked the team supervisor how long they expected to be in Binghamton.

"We're gonna celebrate New Year's here," was the response.

Returning from lunch, the youthful crew slipped into disposable white suits. All of the workers wore hoods. They were told by the supervisor to wear respirators whenever they were working near the debris contaminated with PCBs, a suspected carcinogen.

They did until he walked away. The respirators came off immediately.

"I hate these damn things," said one of the workers.

The respirators cover a worker's nose and mouth, clamped to the face by a strap around the neck. Dual canisters attached near the mouth filter the air the worker breathes.

Three layers of protective plastic and padding were taped to the floor of the truck trailer.

The crew began the tedious task of manually transferring the debris from a metal dumpster into the truck. The loading area reeked of the pungent odor of PCBs.

Suddenly one of the workers yelled a warning, "Dr. Taylor's coming," a reference to Philip K. Taylor, a state Health Department epidemiologist.

A frantic scurry followed as the dozen workers quickly put on their respirators. One of the workers signaled a false alarm and the masks came off again.

After an hour of loading, the supervisor indicated it was time for a break. Although the immediate loading zone was covered by a plastic sheet, the workers moved freely about the entire area, tracking the contaminated black soot everywhere.

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Danger ignored

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A security guard without protective clothing stood by throughout the loading.

Several of the cleanup crew sat on top of the PCB-soaked junk, passing a water jug among them. With each sip, the workers, still wearing work gloves covered with the soot, coated the jug with the black substance.

They then threw the jug to another worker on the ground who was not wearing gloves. When the jug was offered to the driver, he graciously declined.

The supervisor returned with a warning about wearing the respirators. Several of his employees grumbled, saying the 60- and 90-hour workweeks were bad enough without wearing those uncomfortable devices.

By 3:30 the truck was loaded and another layer of plastic was placed over the transformer room debris. The supervisor told the driver to make sure the "Danger" signs were visible on the sides of his truck.

After completing paperwork required by state and federal law, the driver started the five-hour trip to Niagara Falls.

When the truck arrived at the CECOS International Inc. toxic waste graveyard, its contents were placed in a specially constructed landfill.

The innards of the State Office Building are being laid to rest only a few miles from an earlier waste dump — the Love Canal.

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