



## 9/11 'ILL WORKER' OUTRAGE

By SUSAN EDELMAN

*March 26, 2006* -- Construction, electrical, telephone and cleanup workers who spent months toiling in the toxic dust and smoke at Ground Zero are now suffering from cancer and lung disease like cops and firefighters but getting the shaft financially, they say.

Some of the sick have lost jobs. Others struggle to get by on workers' compensation, a maximum \$400 a week, or Social Security. Many ill laborers don't have disability benefits or health insurance.

Gary Acker, 62, a veteran AT&T employee, was terminated by the telecommunications giant after he came down with leukemia in 2004.

As part of the company's disaster-response team, Acker worked 12- to 14-hour shifts for 33 days at the World Trade Center site, helping restore phone service. While inhaling air now known to be choked with benzene, asbestos, mercury, cadmium and PCBs, he never wore a respirator or safety gear.

"We had none of that," he said.

Acker - before 9/11 an avid hunter, fisherman and Empire State Games javelin thrower and shot-putter - survived a stem-cell transplant only to be "downsized" by AT&T. A company spokesman declined to comment.

"I'd go back and do what I did in a heartbeat, but I'd like to make sure my wife and my kids are taken care of," said Acker, a Columbus, N.J., father of two young adults.

Acker has joined a major class-action suit in Manhattan federal court seeking damages for alleged negligence by the city and state agencies and private companies that called on them to restore utilities, clear debris and get downtown running.

The Port Authority and other defendants are fighting to get the suit tossed, claiming immunity because of the 9/11 emergency. Many millions of dollars are at stake.

More stricken hardhats are signing onto the suit - totaling at least 2,000 of the 7,000 rescue and recovery plaintiffs to date, said lead attorney David Worby.

"These people are really out of luck," Worby said. "Their lives are ruined and they don't have three-quarters or half-pay [pensions] for getting hurt on the job."

The ill include Vincent Guastamacchi, 55, a New York Crane operator who got prostate cancer and lung cancer; Anthony Severino, 45, of Malves Equipment, who got leukemia in 2004 and returned to work, but may need a bone-marrow transplant; and Silvia Castillo, 36, a Queens mother of five who cleaned downtown offices with her bare hands, and who now has black lung spots.

"I don't go to the doctor because I can't pay for it," she said.

Others are caught in Catch-22s. John Feal, 39, a demolition supervisor, lost half a foot after a WTC steel beam crushed it on Sept. 17, 2001. He was turned away from the federal Victims Compensation Fund because the cutoff date for injuries was Sept. 15. He then sued his company, but the insurer claims immunity from injuries

before Sept. 29.

"I got \$40,000 for my foot" from workers' comp, said Feal, who is active in the 9/11 support group Unsung Heroes Helping Heroes.

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