NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Memorial Day walk focuses on nuclear toxin deaths

Thomas C. Fox | May. 30, 2011

Demonstrators hold banner in front of new weapons plant (photo: Tom Fox)

On Memorial Day, a day rich in symbols and set aside for commemorating the dead, two dozen peace activists here took time to draw attention to 154 workers at a local nuclear weapons parts plant reported to have died from ingesting plant toxins.

The activists, behind a banner that read ?Transformation, not annihilation,? walked nine miles from the site of Kansas City?s current nuclear weapons manufacturing plant, now in its last months, to the site of a new weapons? parts facility under construction south of the city.

The ?KC Peace Planters,? many of them local Catholics, for the past two years have been trying to raise awareness of the dangers of nuclear weapons as well as plans by the Unite States to build more weapons - despite stated intentions to cut back on the number of strategic weapons in the U.S. arsenal.

Current U.S. budget plans call for an estimated $80 billion to be spent on upgrading the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal in the next decade.

The peaceful Memorial Day commemoration walk took four hours to complete as the group worked its way south of the city along a major artery.

?About 150 workers have died as a result of having worked at the old Kansas City plant or at other locations at the Bannister Federal Complex, and another 250 workers are ill as a result of contaminants there,? said Henry Stoever, chair of the board of PeaceWorks, Kansas City, and a member of the KC Peace Planters. ?What day is more fitting to remember these workers than Memorial Day?? he asked. ?What day is more fitting than to

remember that nuclear abolition is a necessity if we are to survive??

The Kansas City plant, now under construction at an initial cost of $1.2 billion, will build and assemble nonnuclear parts for the U.S. arsenal. Plans are also underway for further expansion of U.S. nuclear weapons facilities in Los Alamos, New Mexico and Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The bishop of the Kansas City ? St. Joseph diocese has questioned the wisdom of building a new weapons plant. Bishop Robert Finn said the city should have other priorities. The chief contractor for the new weapons plant, JEDunn, is owned by a local Catholic family.

Dunn construction is more often associated with building Catholic schools and parish halls. The JE Dunn company views itself as a local family run operation, but one that has grown into a major player in U.S. construction. In 2010, it was ranked the twelfth largest general building company in the United States based on revenues of $2.3 billion in 2009.

The company, however, now finds itself at the center of a $1.2 billion controversial construction contract, a project being questioned by the local bishop and a number of other local Catholics.

Earlier this month, the local peace activists announced that they had gathered enough signatures to move forward with efforts to force a ballot initiative aimed at stopping the construction of the new Kansas City nuclear weapons facility. The initiative recommends the city focus on jobs in ?environmentally sound energy or other environmental technologies? instead of those related to the building of nuclear weapons.

To get the initiative to the voters it must first go through the city council and find its way through potentially hostile courts and business interests. The Kansas City Board of Election Commissioners requires this month validated 4,342 of the 4,966 the activists had gathered, enough to move the peace initiative forward.

The work of the activists is slowly getting the ear of local media. Stories about the illnesses and deaths at the local nuclear weapons facility have increasingly found their way into the media. One news station has been detailing the fatalities and now places the number of fatalities at the Kansas City plant, referred to as the Bannister Federal complex, at more than 150.

?Our petition can help stop the nuclear weapons build-up,? said Ann Suellentrop, a member of Physicians for

Social Responsibility-KC. ?We?ll begin an educational campaign to let Kansas Citians make up their own minds about what they want their tax dollars to go toward?nuclear weapons or environmentally sound technology, like wind turbines and solar panels.?

Source URL (retrieved on *03/11/2014 - 14:12*): http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/memorial-day-walk-focuses-nuclear-toxin-deaths