STUDENT LEADER™ NEWS SERVICE

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The Dead Zone

Dioxins, PCBs Present in 'Astronomical' Levels

By ERIC F. COPPOLINO
Student Leader News Service

NEW PALTZ — Call it a miracle, or call it the worst, most preventable disaster ever to strike an American college campus.

When six electrical transformers insulated with deadly PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) exploded, burned, and spewed contamination the morning of Dec. 29, just seven students had to be evacuated from buildings.

Yet PCB contamination, found so far in 15 SUNY New Paltz buildings, is just the beginning of the story. When PCBs burn, they emit huge quantities of far more toxic chemicals, especially dioxins and dibenzofurans.

A state scientist close to an ongoing investigation of the incident told STUDENT LEADER NEWS SERVICE that dioxin and dibenzofuran test results, now being kept under wraps by top state officials, show these two chemicals have been found at "astronomical" levels in campus buildings where transformer fires occurred.

Dioxins are among the three most toxic substances known to man, found at the Love Canal disaster and contained in Agent Orange, a defoliant used in Vietnam. Dibenzofurans are compounds similar to dioxins, and are almost as toxic; new findings show that PCBs are far more dangerous than previously believed.

"It's fucking incredible," said the source, who is remaining anonymous. "It's the Binghamton office building all over again," he added, referring to the worst indoor PCB disaster in state history — a transformer fire which so far has cost $50 million and taken 12 years to clean up, yet the building is still not considered safe.

As for PCB levels in New Paltz, one area came up 1 million times the "safe" limit, several areas tested in the thousands, and hundreds more tests showed contamination in a total of 15 buildings.

Even more incredible: The campus, including two residence halls where fires occurred, is scheduled to open for regular business in just over a week, as environmental cleanup crews in full protective gear rush to decontaminate buildings.

Cleanup estimates for the New Paltz contaminations in the range of $5 million to $10 million are optimistic, experts familiar with PCB cleanup tell us.

"From what I can hear, and I'm very close to the center of things, this is a very dangerous situation," said the source. "It's very important that they don't go back into those buildings."

Confronted with these statements, Dr.

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STUDENT LEADER PHOTO SERVICE

Scene of the Crime. Area outside Bliss Residence Hall, where the force of a transformer explosion blew off the steel loading dock door. Contamination levels of up to 1 million times the state's allowable PCB level were found in the transformer area, which was left open and unguarded the day after the incident. The building was empty at the time of the explosion, though residents will lose all of their possessions.

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John Hawley, who is overseeing the clean-up for the state **Department of Health**, would neither confirm nor deny them, saying the test results in question were only "preliminary."

"Until we have final results which we've been able to evaluate, it doesn't make sense for me to be commenting on anybody else's characterization of the results," he said, adding that the numbers might be made available to the media the week of Jan. 20.

A College spokesman said Wednesday that the College had no knowledge of any dioxin or dibenzofuran test results.

Officials think the chain of explosions and fires resulted from a 26,000-volt power surge caused by a car hitting a utility pole a mile from the campus — but they claim they're not really sure how it happened [see related story].

The seven exposed students, asleep in **Capen Hall** when the fires broke out at about 7:20 that Sunday morning, were evacuated with towels over their mouths through a mist of sweet-smelling smoke characteristic of PCB fires. They were then stripped naked and hosed down in the freezing rain, then taken to area hospitals, along with 15 emergency personnel and College staff members who were also exposed.

Had the car accident occurred just days earlier, some 990 residents of **Bliss, Capen, Gage** and **Scudder** halls almost inevitably would have been exposed to PCBs, dioxins, and dibenzofurans, putting them at risk of cancer, immune system dysfunctions, genetic disorders and other health problems.

Several New Paltz firefighters who were exposed developed skin rashes soon after the fires. Several told the Kingston *Freeman* newspaper they were asked by the College and the Fire Department not to reveal the results of their PCB blood tests, though the College denied this Wednesday.

"We'd still be waiting for ambulances right now" had the dorms been full, said **Jimmy LaPlante**, one of the first volunteer firefighters to arrive at the scene.

When Fire Chief **Steve Vaccaro** arrived and realized it was a PCB fire, LaPlante was sent into Gage Hall, which was billowing thick, white PCB smoke visible for half a mile, to retrieve two other firefighters who had gone in unaware of the situation.

The Fire Department then backed off the fires. "We weren't going anywhere near them, with the PCBs," Vaccaro said. "They would have burned to the ground before I would have started fighting those fires." Had water been used on the transformers, the PCBs would have been spread along the ground and into waterways for as far as the runoff carried them.

15 Buildings Affected

A total of 19 SUNY New Paltz buildings contain PCB transformers.

There were explosions or fires in six: Bliss, Capen, Gage, and Scudder residence halls, plus **Parker Theater** and the **Coykendall Science Building**. The most seriously contaminated are Bliss, Coykendall, Parker Theatre and Scudder Hall, for which clean-up plans have not yet even been drawn. Personal possessions left inside Bliss and Scudder will end up in a toxic waste dump, experts say, as should property left in Gage and possibly Capen halls.

Capen Hall, despite showing more than *800 times* the state's "safe" level of PCB contamination in the transformer room, will be opened by Jan. 30, College officials say, as will Gage Hall. Though Gage was the scene of a major fire, the state Health Department said Wednesday that all the smoke went out the door, and reported that only small amounts of PCBs were showed up in tests.

Other losses: More than $100,000 in new computer equipment had just been

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What Are PCBs?

Student Leader News Service

When PCBs were "high tech" in the 1940s and 1950s, they were hailed by industry as a major breakthrough and used extensively for hundreds of purposes. What GE and other makers of PCBs didn't tell you is that they're also "high tox."

More than 1.4 billion pounds of PCB chemicals were manufactured before they were banned in 1979. Uses ranged from lubricating oil to pigment carriers in fabric dyes.

Mainly, they were used in transformers as a coolant and insulating nonconductor of electricity. PCBs were also used in capacitors in older appliances, from radios to air conditioners — a major source of contamination in homes, schools and offices. Like asbestos, another carcinogenic commonly found in SUNY buildings, PCBs can turn up almost anywhere, though PCB migration is quite remarkable. PCBs have been found at the polar caps, in the Hudson and many rivers in Europe, and are present in virtually every human body in small quantities. Most human exposure comes from eating fish, in which PCBs collect and build through the food chain. The Hudson River and surrounding areas were contaminated mainly **General Electric**, manufacturer of the transformer in Coykendall and the developer of Askarel, the PCB oil used in most of the six of the New Paltz transformers which burned.

STUDENT LEADER NEWS SERVICE

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SUNY's Secret Nuke

Town Fire Chief Wasn't Warned that 'Mini-Chernobyl' Was Possible

By ERIC F. COPPOLINO
Student Leader News Service

NEW PALTZ — The New Paltz fire chief said College officials have never warned him about a nuclear device on campus that, if involved in a fire, would emit plumes of thick, radioactive smoke.

The device, called a plutonium-berylium howitzer, is located underground next to the **Wooster Science Building.**

Sources say it contains about 5 grams of weapons grade plutonium, insulated by more than 500 pounds of oil-based paraffin wax. Dozens of other radioactive devices are stored in the same vault.

The machine is called a "howitzer" because it's used to bombard things with radiation.

"I didn't know that was there," said Fire Chief **Steve Vacarro,** when asked by Student Leader News Service whether he had ever been told about it. Vacarro said he would contact the College to find out more about the device, and safety plans for it, this week.

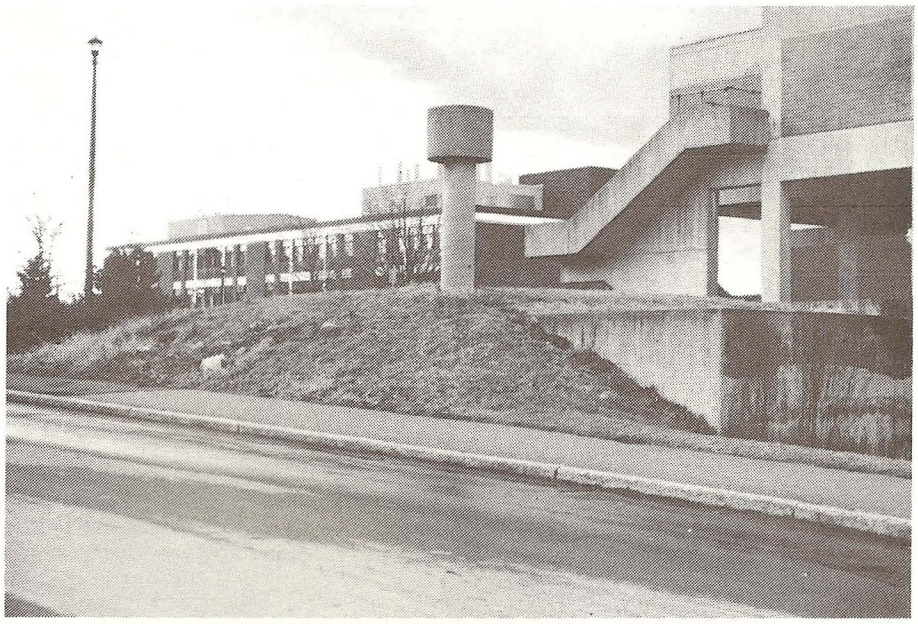
1950 Government Model

The howitzer, a 1950 model made by the **Atomic Energy Commission,** is used primarily for experimentation by physics students and faculty members.

The presence of the howitzer on campus has long been a concern of **Peter Shipley** of the **University Fiscal Action Committee,** who says it should be removed immediately because it's a serious danger to the community.

Shipley's committee, which monitors SUNY and CUNY fiscal issues, had repeatedly warned college officials about the possibility of a PCB fire on campus, but was ignored by administrators.

Shipley, a former volunteer fire chief in the town of Wallkill, said the combination of burning wax and plutonium would create a "mini-Chernobyl," possibly requiring evacuation of the town. Evacuation was almost required in the recent PCB fires, and would have been started had the prevailing winds been blowing toward homes.



STUDENT LEADER PHOTO SERVICE

Underground Activity. Beneath this mound of earth is a 1950 model plutonium berylium howitzer, containing 5 grams of weapons-grade plutonium in 500 pounds of wax. The concrete pillar is for ventilation of radon gas, which is produced by all radioactive sources. The tower is so high so that bypassers are not exposed to the radon; in the event of a fire in the howitzer, it would pour radioactive smoke. The building in the background is the Coykendall Science Building, condemned for PCB and possible dioxin contamination.

Plutonium, one of the deadliest substances known to man, is a primary ingredient in an atomic bomb. Shipley said it's his understanding that five grams of plutonium, if mishandled, could kill a person exposed to it in a matter of minutes.

Plutonium has a radioactive half-life of 3,000 years and is considered one of the deadliest substances on earth. The "half life" is the time in which half of a radioactive substance will decay.

'Assumed They Knew'

Prof. **Donald Walker** of the Physics Department, who is the College's radiation safety officer, said he believed a fire involving the howitzer is unlikely, but also said the Fire Department should have known the device was on campus.

"I've always assumed that everyone knew about it," Walker said Monday.

Walker said the state's fire inspection report of the campus is filed as a matter of routine procedure with the local Fire Department every year, and it's through that report, which lists the College's fire code violations and other findings, that the Fire Department should have known about the existence of the howitzer.

Vaccaro, however, said that the report is an inch-and-a-half thick, and said this didn't count as being notified by the College.

And Shipley, who, as a former chief is familiar with state fire procedures, said the howitzer didn't even have to be mentioned in the inspection report.

Safety Officer Didn't Know

Peter Betley, the College's coordinator of environmental health and safety, said that the Fire Department should have had a record of the machine's existence in its files.

However, Betley said he didn't even know that the howitzer contained plutonium, which, unlike many other radioactive substances, requires special permits

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STUDENT LEADER PHOTO SERVICE

No Problem. Environmental workers decontaminate Gage Hall, which College officials say will be safe and ready for occupancy by Jan. 30. Firefighters described plumes of PCB smoke pouring from the building when they arrived at the scene at 7:30 a.m. Dec. 29. **Inset**, New Paltz College President Alice Chandler speaks to reporters Dec. 30, the day after the incident. Several days later, Chandler left for Texas.

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moved into Coykendall just before the fires; numerous irreplaceable scientific research projects were destroyed by contamination; an extensive collection of antique costumes was probably destroyed in Parker Theatre. The list goes on.

Students who lose their belongings will probably be covered under the state **Dormitory Authority**'s insurance policy, though settlement could take months, based on past experience with SUNY. The **Red Cross** will reportedly be assisting by providing students with small cash loans to help replace belongings, and the **Residence Hall Association** is assisting with replacing textbooks.

Other contaminated buildings, discovered when "routine" PCB tests were run in all 19 buildings where PCBs are used: the **Administration Building**, **Elting Gymnasium**, the **Health Center**, the **Heating Plant**, the **Old Library Building**, **Smiley Hall**, **Sojourner Truth Library**, the **Student Union Building**, and the **van den Berg Learning Center**.

While College and state government officials are saying they're not sure what happened in these other buildings, outside sources say their transformers probably overheated at the same time as the six others burned, releasing PCBs into the rooms, or "vaults," that surround them.

Following cleanup of affected areas, the buildings are being opened by the **County Health Department** one by one as they're deemed safe. State and county officials have final say over whether College buildings are usable, and grant written permission to the administration to open them once satisfactory test results are obtained.

SUNY-Wide Problem

If it sounds like a lot of New Paltz buildings are affected, consider this: SUNY has now admitted that *one out of four* of its buildings across the system contains a PCB transformer, and many of them are in residence halls.

PCBs are a type of industrial oil, widely manufactured between 1920 and when they were banned in 1979, which cools the transformers, at the same time providing electrical insulation and resistance to fires. The more toxic they are, the "better" they work. Askarel, the type of chemical used in most of the New Paltz transformers, has been described as the "champion" PCB, containing 60% pure toxins.

And despite a federal requirement to

remove PCBs from campuses by next year, SUNY Vice Chancellor **Irving Freedman** said it could take up to 10 more years to get the job done in its more than 450 PCB transformers.

A SUNY spokesman said that its interpretation of the federal rules may be different than that of other agencies, but insisted that, in its reading of the rules, SUNY was in compliance with all federal guidelines for PCB transformers until they must be modified or removed in 1993.

No Answers

Weeks after the incident, there are still only theories to explain why the fires occurred, and why accidents occurred only with transformers containing PCBs.

Public officials handling the crisis grow more tight-lipped by the day, often refusing to give specific answers to questions — a tactic also being used by the environmental firms handling the cleanup.

Among the more salient questions still lingering:

•Why didn't circuit breakers and surge protectors shut off the transformers before they exploded?

•Why didn't the first firefighters who responded know they were entering a PCB fire? Were they properly warned?

•Was the College in compliance with special federal safety guidelines for keeping PCB transformers until they must be modified or disposed of in 1993? What about other campuses?

•Why are PCB transformers even still in use on all SUNY campuses?

•Why did six transformers burn and explode simultaneously, while numerous others were less affected or unaffected by the power surge?

•If officials can't be sure why the incident happened, what will prevent this from happening again?

•Can the state's private clean-up and testing companies be trusted? Who will verify their results?

•And most important, is the campus really safe for students and staff?

The safety question is one that is dealt with mainly in statistics and speculation, and is most critical for students who will be living in Capen and Gage halls, both the scenes of serious incidents.

The four buildings where the most serious fires occurred technically are closed only for the semester, though PCBs, dioxins, and dibenzofurans take much longer than that to clean up.

But Gage and Capen residents potentially face the most widely feared type of exposure to PCBs and other carcinogens:

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What Happened?

Student Leader News Service

How or why did six transformers containing PCBs burn and explode the morning of Dec. 29, and why did at least 11 others probably overheat?

Here's what's known for sure about the events of that morning.

At 6:28 a.m., a car hit a utility pole on South Putt Corners Road, about a mile from the campus. At exactly that time, power blinked in at least some parts of the town, and at the same time, numerous burglar and automatic fire alarms went off in the campus police office.

Since burglar and fire alarms went off at the same time, College officials say they assumed there was an electrical problem of some kind, and began investigating. No problems were found for almost an hour, when the College called the New Paltz police to report heavy smoke and possible electrical fires.

At 7:25, the Fire Department was dispatched to electrical fires, which by that time were raging in several buildings.

That's all that's known for sure. The rest is speculation.

Officials of Central Hudson, the local electric company, have speculated that the car accident caused two 13,000-volt power lines to cross, sending a 26,000-volt surge into the campus's power system. The College's official explanation is that the power surge — which may have lasted the full hour — caused the transformers to malfunction, overheat, and eventually to explode and burn. But that explanation still leaves several important questions.

For example, why did only six transformers — in Bliss, Capen, Coykendall, Gage, Parker, and Scudder — have the most serious problems?

One thing all six have in common, according to College officials, is what's called a "wye-wye configuration" (pronounced Y-Y). That's electrical jargon for how the two sides of the transformer relate to one another. The rest of the transformers on campus have what's called "delta-wye" configurations.

Wye-wye transformers, according to research conducted by STUDENT LEADER NEWS SERVICE, have two qualities that may have led to their burning and blowing up.

The first is that they can't handle current that's not extremely clean, or "in-phase." The "phase" of current is a way of talking about whether the current and the force pushing the current (amperage and voltage, respectively) are moving at the same number of cycles per second. If one gets ahead of the other, then the current is called "out of phase." Delta-wyes can handle shifts in phase.

Utility equipment that's damaged by a car accident can produce current that's extremely out of phase. In this case, there may have been two separate out-of-phase 13,000-volt streams of current flooding the campus electrical system and hitting the wye-wye transformers, eventually causing them to blow.

The second quality: Wye-wye transformers are usually used at the end of electrical circuits, as was the case in much of the College's utility system. Being at the end of the line, the current has no where else to go, causing a fire or explosion.

Most of the transformers involved in fires were also smaller than the ones which were not involved in fires, which may have been a factor.

Questions still remain, however: Why didn't circuit breakers stop the current? All PCB transformers are supposed to have extremely sensitive protection equipment. The protection might have failed, or it might not have been there. Investigators say they won't know for sure until they can get into the old transformers and inspect them. Till then, it's a mystery or a well-guarded secret.

— Research by Lizanne E. Webb

STUDENT LEADER PHOTO SERVICE

The Red Zone. The morning of the fires, this area, known as a red zone, was used to decontaminate people who were exposed to PCBs and other toxins.

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That which occurs over long periods of time. But College and state health officials insist that buildings will not be cleared for re-occupancy until they test safer than the state's standard, which is the safest of three standards being used.

Another concern: Outside areas were contaminated as well. If some of these are unaccounted for, then students risk the possibility of tracking toxins into their living environments. And rainwater is almost certain to spread PCBs and other chemicals around. One reading on the roof of Parker Theatre showed PCB levels of more than 1,000 times the state's limit. This contamination could end up in waterways, the storm sewer system, and deposited in soil.

Other High PCB Levels

All six buildings where fires were listed are presently not safe enough to enter without a "moon suit," including self-contained breathing apparatus in some areas.

PCB contamination near the explosion site in Bliss Hall, an all-womyn's dorm, was found to be 1 million times the "acceptable" level listed in state guidelines, according to test results released by SUNY.

Coykendall Science Building had PCB levels of up to 3,200 times the "safe" level in one location. Both showed contamination throughout the structures, as did Scudder Hall.

Government officials are quick to point out that there is no definitive answer to what is considered "safe." For example, the federal **Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) "safe" limit is ten times that of the state. The federal **Occupational Health and Safety Administration** (OSHA) "safe" limit is fifty times higher than that of the state.

And many typical households test from between one-third the state level, to just below it. Further, health officials say that there's no definitive proof that PCBs harm humans, a statement which has repeatedly appeared in the press. Other experts know otherwise, given the solid evidence of cancer in animals. And it's firmly established that dioxins and dibenzofurans are deadly to humans.

SUNY Knew of Risks

The presence of PCBs in SUNY buildings has never been a secret to SUNY Central or the New Paltz College administration, though students have little knowledge that they may be sleeping upstairs from 300 gallons of flammable, electrified toxic waste.

Peter Shipley, chairman of the **University Fiscal Action Committee**, has repeatedly warned SUNY administrators, state legislators and local officials of "PCB-laden transformers" that are "ticking like time bombs" in campus buildings, most recently warning the deputy mayor of New Paltz 10 days before the fires.

Shipley, whose independent activist group monitors SUNY and CUNY spending, has urged for years that the PCBs be removed immediately, a process which costs about $20,000 per unit and involves several changes of oil.

Cleaning up the New Paltz incident will cost at least $5 million, according to an independent study by the *Times Herald-Record* newspaper — enough to modify 250 transformers prior to disaster striking. SUNY Central will foot the entire bill for the clean-up project, which other sources said could go as high as $10 million.

After a fire, tests for PCBs can cost up to $500 each; tests for dioxins and dibenzofurans cost $2,000 each — *just the tests*, which must repeated numerous times during the extremely costly cleaning process, if done correctly.

There's no limit on what cleanup of a PCB incident can cost; removing the PCBs and refurbishing of one tainted state office building in Binghamton has cost the taxpayers $50 million so far, and has taken 12 years — and the structure is still not considered safe to use because the transformer room is still contaminated.

Shipley sharply criticized SUNY's statement that it could take 10 years to get the PCBs out of campus buildings. "SUNY is too busy building field houses, hiring administrators and paying for perks for college officials to take care of the safety of its students," Shipley said, pointing out that SUNY could face hefty fines if it leaves the transformers in place illegally.

SUNY Binghamton and **SUNY Stony Brook** have already faced fines for non-compliance with federal guidelines, according to the *Poughkeepsie Journal* newspaper.

Meanwhile, Shipley said the average SUNY college president still has a salary of $100,000, plus a nearly free house and a free state car and driver — and has a $15,000 entertainment budget, maid service, and even perks like a free phone and cable television.

"They're willing to risk lives so they can live like royalty," said Shipley. "And now, they'll spend millions on a cleanup and may entirely lose buildings. There are almost certain to be lawsuits. And the whole thing could have been prevented."

Under current laws, transformers con-

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SUNY's Nuke

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from the federal **Nuclear Regulatory Commission** (NRC).

Betley then said he was certain that Vacarro's predecessor as fire chief knew about the howitzer, and blamed the fact that Vacarro is a relatively new fire chief for his not knowing about it. Vacarro has served for about two years.

"It was kept secret," Shipley countered. "I went 'round and 'round for years with the College. They don't want anyone to know this thing is there."

Shipley said he had personally discussed the fact that the howitzer contained plutonium with Betley and many other College administrators, who strongly resisted giving him any information.

Shipley had to use the **Freedom of Information Act** to force the College to open its files.

Safety Violations Discovered

Shipley said his committee began looking at the College's nuclear program when when he received reports of irradiated animal carcasses being left in open laboratories and unshielded metal cabinets.

Shipley said that after complaining, the College was forced to remove the dead animals, which included frogs, mice, rats and rabbits, to a nuclear waste dump in South Carolina, at a cost of $5,000.

Shipley said that after reviewing pages of College records, he learned that more 15 different radiation sources were taken to the dump in the same trip.

He also learned that the animals and other nuclear waste products were sent back to the College because disposal procedures had not been followed; and that they were re-packed and sent again.

Approximately a year later, Shipley said he received a complaint from a janitor who was concerned that he was being ordered to put radioactive waste in College dumpsters. Doing further investigation on the College's nuclear program, he personally saw packages full plastic marked "radioactive" in dumpsters.

The College claimed that they were empty packages, though the NRC ruled that even empty containers can't be thrown in dumpsters.

Janitor Exposed

Shipley said he was also aware of another janitor who accidentally looked inside the port of the howitzer and then became ill for several months with a blood disorder.

Shipley said that he was also aware the vault door was being held open with a rock, which he said is documented in a photograph in the *Oracle*. He also discovered that many people had the key to the vault. Only two people — the radiation safety officer and his assistant — are supposed to have the key.

"The janitors were very uncomfortable about having to vacuum inside that vault," Shipley said.

Walker, the radiation safety officer, denied that there had ever been any safety violations by the College. Walker also claimed the door to the vault was never left open, and that janitors never go inside the vault because it is a restricted area.

But Shipley said that policy was put into effect only after he "raised hell" with the College. Shipley also demanded that the room be equipped with an intrusion alarm, which it now is.

You're in the PCB Time Zone — Reset Your Brain

Jan. 27	**Drop-in registration. Drop in and register.**
Jan. 30	Residence halls open, 11 a.m. Welcome back!
Jan. 30	**Transfer orientation/registration/contamination.**
Jan. 31	Freshman/late registration. Get busy!
Feb. 3	**First day of classes. Wear protective gear.**
Feb. 16	End of 70% Tuition Refund. Rip-off.
Feb. 23	**End of 50% tuition refund. Robbery.**
March 1	End of 30% tuition refund. Gross injustice.
March 2	**Students incur full tuition liability. Fraud!!**
March 20	Mid-point in the semester. Reflect for a moment.
March 30	**Last day for course withdrawal. Go for it.**
April 6-10	Advance registration for fall 1992. Hmmmmm...
April 17-20	**Spring recess, not spring break. (Fri. to Mon. off).**
May 7	Last day of classes. Salvation is in sight.
May 8	**Common exam/study day/blow-off day.**
May 11-15	Final exams & exposure tests (just kidding).
May 16	**Residence halls close at 6 p.m. Whew!**
May 17	Commencement. Anarchy. Revolution.

PCBs, Continued from Page 6

taining PCBs must be removed from thousands of commercial and educational buildings by 1993, according to the EPA, though this deadline has been extended and modified several times, most recently in July of 1991. Yet while SUNY officials say New Paltz College was in compliance with the EPA's special conditions for keeping their equipment until 1993, a debate is raging behind the scenes of this incident over whether the College was actually in compliance with federal codes.

The EPA will not give its opinion on the matter, and said it will have no conclusions on the incident for two months.

One rule in question: PCB transformers must be equipped with automatic shut-off devices to protect against fires caused by voltage surges like the one which probably caused the New Paltz incidents.

Yet if the New Paltz transformers were equipped with such devices, they apparently failed to work when needed the most, as did circuit breakers located in the electrical campus substation (on Rt. 32 by College Hall) and on the College's electrical control board, located near the Service Building.

Meanwhile, the exact cause of the explosions and fires remains cloaked in mystery. Several different teams of investigators are looking for the cause, including a special contractor hired by SUNY Central — who has been given strict instructions not to speak to reporters.

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Who's Next?

TO FULLY COMPREHEND THE ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER AT SUNY's College at New Paltz, you have to walk across the campus and see it for yourself. The laboratory statistics and cost estimates, while shocking, don't tell the story.

To step across a lawn or through a puddle is to fear picking up deadly contaminants — some of the worst known to humanity: PCBs, dioxins and dibenzofurans.

Police lines are marked with yellow tape across a dozen buildings, some of which may never open again.

The wind is the loudest sound.

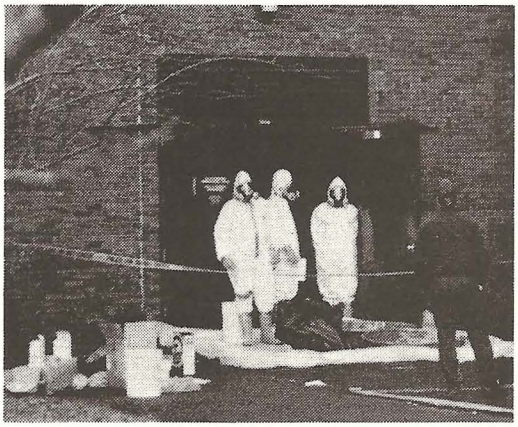
Around every corner is a new strange sight, whether it's a building draped in plastic, a cluster of fifty chemical waste drums, or a row of kiddie pools where the 22 victims of contamination were scrubbed down the morning of the fires.

In front of the magnificent backdrop of Mohonk Mountain, hazardous material crews, sealed in white "moon suits" with self-contained breathing apparatus, work silently outside a dorm where your friends used to live.

Now, imagine this scene on your campus. One out of every four SUNY buildings contains a PCB transformer, as do thousands of other buildings.

Once hailed as a marvel of industry, it's long been common knowledge that they're as safe and as "high tech" as the Hindenburg.

Keep in mind that PCB transformers become dioxin bombs when they burn or explode, with the fire's heat churning out scores of new deadly compounds.



Sojourner Truth Library.

Yet SUNY still owns 450 transformers packed in PCB oil. Irving Freedman, SUNY Central's vice chancellor for facilities, thinks it's reasonable to deal with the problem in the next *10 years* — knowing full well the EPA says PCBs have to be out by October of 1993.

It's a risk so daunting, it makes you seriously question the sanity of the public officials who are taking it.

And it's proven that SUNY was warned: Peter Shipley of the independent University Fiscal Action Committee warned New Paltz President Alice Chandler again and again, verbally and in writing, about the danger of PCB transformers he said were "ticking like time bombs" in campus buildings.

(Chandler, incidentally, left for Texas at the peak of the crisis last week, and Karen Summerlin, her official spokesperson, didn't even know where she was. Now, Summerlin is away on a two-week vacation.)

If callous SUNY administrators are willing to gamble lives, the people whose lives are being gambled must take action: identifying the PCB transformers on their campus and then forcing the administration to make the cheap and easy modifications.

Now is a good time, while the issue is out in the open.

One walk across the New Paltz campus would be enough to convince you, beyond any doubt, that your campus could be next.

YET NEW PALTZ, OR MOST OF NEW PALTZ, WAS INCREDIBLY lucky. Just ten days earlier, a *thousand* students would have been caught in those fires.

Water could have accidentally been used, which would have spread contamination in all directions, into yards, into the streets of the town, and into the Wallkill River system.

Different winds that morning would have required evacuating parts of the village, according to town Fire Chief Steve Vaccaro.

Vaccaro, though, also knows the other side of the story. At least five volunteer firefighters were exposed to PCBs, and some are already sick. The entire Fire Department, which worked at the scene for 12 hours, may have been exposed just from breathing the air. All 175 emergency personnel who responded are in the same boat.

The New Paltz Rescue Squad building is closed for possible contamination. A minimum of $10,000 of emergency equipment was contaminated, and the College doesn't even contribute to the town's emergency services.

Now, it comes to light that the College has a plutonium device on campus that fire officials weren't even warned about. Called a "plutonium-berylium howitzer," it consists of five grams of weapons-grade plutonium sitting in *500 pounds of paraffin wax.*

How about that.

Even more mind-blowing, Peter Betley, the College's health and safety officer, claims he didn't know the device contained plutonium — a man-made element created to *quadruple* the force of the atomic bomb, and which requires special permits from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Shipley says he personally told Betley about the plutonium; Betley said Fire Department officers simply should have known, even if he didn't tell them.

With people like this running the College, maybe it's time to roll a few heads.

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