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BOOK REVIEW
THE POLITICS OF CANCER
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Samuel S. Epstein, M.D., The Politics of Cancer, Sierra Club Books (cloth), Anchor Press — Doubleday (paper), 1979, $12.50 (cloth), $6.95 (paper).

Although cancer is not the leading cause of death (number two after arterial diseases), nor the leading cause of loss of "working" (i.e., before 65) years (number three after accidents and arterial diseases), it has become the leading disease concern of the U.S. public. It is increasing as a percentage of deaths, and its incidence is also increasing, so that by the year 2,000, it is estimated, 1 out of 4 of us will get it and 1 out of 5 of us will die from it. It is a disease that causes vast trauma and from which no class or age is immune. Public concern is due, in part, to the public relations campaign carried out by the largest "disease organization" in the world, the American Cancer Society (ACS). Concern is due also to the prevalence of the disease and to the fact that cancer treatment and death is almost always a protracted and traumatic process that stresses families and friends of the patient. It is the most expensive disease, a conservative cost estimate being $30 billion a year for treatment and work time lost.

In 1970, Richard Nixon declared his phony "war on cancer" and promised that a cure would soon be available. By 1976, wiser heads began to prevail, and it was admitted that miracle cures were not around the corner. Many criticisms have appeared offering reasons for the "failure" of the "war on cancer." Two analyses have attracted popular attention. One (embodied in articles in such glossy magazines as Penthouse) is a ridiculous misdirection of public anger. The other, elaborated in Sam Epstein's book, is an approach that the working - class movement should understand and support.

The first approach (which has been supported actively by the John Birth Society), is that the "Cancer Establishment" (medical centers, ACS, researchers and government) is tied closely to the monopoly drug corporations, and, in their interest, is suppressing existing "cures" such as Laetrile or vitamin therapy. The second approach says that cancer is caused overwhelmingly by toxic agents added (intentionally and unintentionally) to our environment by industry, which has made human health (as Engles originally observed in his Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844) part of the costs of production for which the working class pays.

The first approach offers panaceas of no more value than snake oil. A single or a few remedies are proposed to deal with the 100 or more different diseases that go under the heading of cancer. These agents are less noxious than many of the therapies which the medical establishment uses (some of which do indeed cure cancer, others which give some extension of life, and others, sadly, which are ineffective and probably shouldn't be used any more), but they have no more effectiveness than such appeals to divine intervention as trips to Lourdes. A certain very small percentage of cancers seem to be spontaneously cured, even without any treatment.

The second approach offers a chance to politically struggle to reduce our own and our children's chances of getting cancer (as well as birth defects). It recognizes that cancer is largely a preventable disease and that cleaning up the environment is one sure way of reducing its incidence, perhaps by as much as 80 per cent (the World Health Organization has stated that 60-90 per cent of all cancer is environmentally induced, though most causative factors are as yet unidentified).

Furthermore, the approach that Dr. Epstein outlines is one that can unite the working - class and public interest movements. Epstein correctly recognizes that it is in the interest of the industrial workers first of all to have an environment with a low cancer risk, because the highest cancer risk arises in the workplace environment and spreads from there to the general environment.

In 11 chapters and some excellent appendices the author describes the real politics of cancer — the politics of the class war (though he doesn't use the term) which results from the drive for profits by the ruling class from production and sales of materials that can cause cancer and losses to the working class (and all other classes in society) from those cancer causing materials. In these pages we have quotes directly from the ruling class' scientific and medical hangers - on that demonstrate the essential immorality of the capitalist system. For example:

"People are talking about a cancer hot spot here. They are blaming industry. They are blaming everybody but themselves." (Frank Rauscher, former director of the National Cancer Institute, speaking in Rutgers, New Jersey, p. 427.)

"Cancer in its many forms is undoubtedly a natural disease. It is probably one of nature's many ways of eliminating sexually effected individuals who would otherwise, in nature's view, compete for available food resources without advantage to the species as a whole." (F.R.C. Roe, British journalist, p. 299.)

"A regulatory program based on experimental screening models to evaluate new chemicals prior to their introduction into the environment, however, will hinder the better documentation of this correlation (between the potential for chemicals to cause cancer in animals with their potential in humans) than we have presently. When a carcinogen is prevented from entering the environment on the basis of screening results (causing cancer in animals), there can be no data regarding that exposure in man." (Vaun Newill, Medical Director of Exxon, p. 59.)

Epstein doesn't fall for simplistic scenarios of the heroic individuals scientist or doctor (like "Quincy") who single-handedly fights the system and usually wins. He instead emphasizes throughout his book that "Over the last decade, virtually all regulatory actions against carcinogens in the workplace, in consumer products, and in the environment have been developed only at the initiative of public interest groups or organized labor. The scientific community has been largely indifferent . . ." (p. 78.) Epstein consistently gives credit where credit is due — to those trade unions and consumer groups, as
well as to individual scientists and doctors who have allied themselves with such groups, who have been the chief fighters against cancer. Better yet, in tables and appendices the author gives addresses and phone numbers of groups for the interested activist to hook up with. Included is a list of trade union and labor publications that have published materials on occupationally and environmentally caused cancer.

The book begins with a discussion of the scientific principles and methods involved in determining the causes of cancer. Without sacrificing scientific accuracy, the author gives an excellent popular account of the methods of epidemiology (the science of disease statistics), and especially how human epidemiology has been used to determine the causes of human cancer since 1775 (when Percival Pott correctly identified chimney soot as the cause of scrotal cancer in English chimney sweeps). Epstein also explains the limits of human epidemiology. It can not always determine elevated risk in populations (unless a chemical causes an unusual type of cancer in people, or causes an extraordinarily early appearance of a common cancer in a large number of people, it is almost impossible to show elevated risk due to exposure to some agent).

He then discusses the science of toxicology and describes how animal experimentation can be used to prevent human exposure to cancer causing agents. He also describes the arguments industry and its scientists use against animal tests. He explains why one has to use a large dose of a chemical on a small group of animals to compensate for human exposure to millions at much lower doses. Epstein points out that it would only cost about $200 million to adequately test all the chemicals (about 700) that enter mass production in one year. This would be only 0.2 per cent of chemical industry sales in a year or less than 3 per cent of the declared after - tax profits. It seems a small price to pay to drastically reduce the annual cancer toll.

Epstein then goes into detailed case studies. Under the heading of Workplace Studies, Epstein discusses asbestos, vinyl chloride, bischloromethyl ether (BCME) and benzene. In each case, the author documents the many positions industry and its paid consultants take to minimize risks, over - emphasize benefits (to society, not to their profits), deny the feasibility of engineering controls or technological substitution, and magnify the costs of cleaning up. The bottom line industry always resorts to, as it does in any environmental fight, is that jobs will be lost if industry has to pay for cleaning up. Although Epstein nowhere acknowledges the possibility this position could be fought, the story he tells makes an excellent case for breaking the power of the monopoly corporations to profiteer, cause disease, and then leave human wreckage behind.

Epstein's best points come in exposing how industry's captive scientists lie. This sort of information will enable all of us to read a newspaper article on a cancer issue (such as saccharin) critically. For example, cancer is a disease in which there is always a considerable lag time between exposure to a cancer causing chemical and appearance of disease (as much as 20-30 years in adults). Many industry studies showing the "safety" of chemicals or drugs or workplace agents (like asbestos) are based on looking at all workers who are exposed, whether they have just started work or have been working for a long period of time, and at the same time not looking at the retirees from that work exposure. This sort of statistical fiddle was used by an industry-supported scientist to "prove" the safety of Canadian asbestos as opposed to South African asbestos.

Furthermore, industry's hired scientists often argue that evidence of animal cancer can not be used to certify that something poses a cancer risk to humans because one can not extrapolate from animals to man. On the other hand, some people argue that the human evidence that benzene causes cancer is invalid, because it does not cause cancer in the animal studies so far reported.

Next Epstein discusses consumer products, such as tobacco, food coloring dyes, saccharin, acrylonitrile (formerly used to make plastic Coca - Cola bottles) and female sex hormones given as drugs. The author describes how the evidence developed that they caused cancer. He then discusses the fight to regulate the materials, and how industry and its allies tie things up in the courts, often winning the right ("freedom") to continue exposing us to cancer causing agents. For example, the drug Premarin has been actively pushed by the drug companies upon the medical profession, who in turn have pushed it upon women undergoing menopause. "Nobody has shown a cause - and - effect relationship between Premarin and cancer. It does not cause cancer. It just accelerates it," said a Vice President of Ayerst Laboratories, Nov. 23, 1977 (p. 212).

Not until there was substantial human exposure were these powerful drugs looked at for their human cancer causing potential (even though animal studies in the 1930s suggested they increased the risk of cancer). Similarly, food coloring dyes derived from coal tars (along with 9 pounds of other food additives we consume every year), were not adequately tested in animals, or, if the evidence of animal tests (paid for by the company marketing the product) did show a risk, the data were often "reinterpreted" or even suppressed.

Epstein discusses contamination of the general environment by cancer causing pesticides and herbicides and nitrosamines. In all these cases, Dr. Epstein acknowledges how trade unions and/or public interest groups, supported by independent and courageous scientists and doctors, had to take on a massive corporate apparatus that wished to continue making profits at the expense of human lives.

Epstein then discusses what is to be done. He emphasizes that the fight to control cancer is a political fight, and that it has been and must be lead by the mass organizations of the people, and especially those of the working class. He begins by discussing how to make industry data better. He opposes the present system, in which industry chooses who to pay for studies to determine the "safety" of the agent it wishes to market, and then submits these data to the appropriate government agency for review.

These studies are either done by industry's own laboratories, or else are awarded to labs which survive on industry contracts. The incentive to overlook hints of danger (only 1 out of 24 industry-sponsored animal studies on pesticide carcinogenicity that were reviewed by a scientific committee had any scientific value) supports Epstein's idea that industry should pay the government to contract for studies on a product's safety, and thereby remove its direct control of the data (this alone, of course, is no protection from development of an "old - boy" network).

Epstein even wants to offer industry incentives to use such a system, absolving them of responsibility if their products later cause damage to humans because the testing wasn't sensitive enough. However, he does point out that "Homicide or assault by chemicals is a serious variant of white collar crime . . . The recognition and social stigmatization of those involved in these crimes is long overdue." (P. 314.)

Epstein discusses the governmental and non-governmental policies concerning cancer, including the workings and misworkings of the regulatory and research agencies, the misdeeds of industry, the courageous fight of unions and especially the rank and file, and a good discussion of the public interest movement (Nader - type groups), and the weaknesses of the American Cancer Society in fighting for the prevention of cancer.

He concludes with a section on "What You Can Do." While discussing those things one can do in choosing an individual lifestyle (avoiding tobacco, living and working in environments not exposed to carcinogens, avoiding junk food, avoiding car-
cinogenic consumer products, and even how to sue or bring other legal action in each area and type of exposure), Epstein avoids the mistake of leaving it to individual action. He begins and ends with emphasis on how exposure to carcinogens is not our fault, but is due to capitalism (although he doesn’t name it as such).

Modern industrial society offers most people little opportunity to choose freely where to live, where to work, what air to breathe, what water to drink, what food to eat, and what advertising to read or hear. Only organized political action will lead to a significant reduction in exposure to environmental carcinogens (p. 430.)

Furthermore, Epstein says, you have only two realistic options for effective political action — either working with the relatively new (and organizationally still very weak) public interest movement, or by working with organized labor.

There are a number of problems Epstein does not address. One is an additional way trade unions might guarantee, from their own resources, more accuracy in testing. He only proposes that government should somehow guarantee the protection of the workers by developing a sympathetic scientific and regulatory program. This is short-sighted.

Epstein recognizes trade unions need to have their own experts. But today only the United Mine Workers has its own doctor to advise on occupational safety and health and only a few others have even an industrial hygenist or toxicologist. Furthermore, for more research sympathetic to labor, trade unions, like industry, should endow their own research programs in universities. The Rubber Workers won money in their last contract to endow a professorship in occupational health. Unfortunately, they allowed industry to have a decisive say in who got the chair.

A second problem is how to prevent shops from “running away” from environmental controls. Epstein recognizes this as a problem but offers no solution. I would suggest that political and mass action could get legislation to prevent runaways or at least make the cost of running away greater than the cost of cleaning up.

Both of the above omissions are rooted in Epstein’s lack of a Marxist framework for analysis. He tends to see a number of institutions (universities, government) as basically independent of class interest. Thus he fails to understand why Carter’s appointment of some activists from the public interest movement to regulatory agencies has in part served to weaken the movement and moderate the position of those individuals. He doesn’t emphasize the importance of movements continuing outside of the government regardless of what positions and influence they may obtain. He didn’t foresee the current offensive to dismantle the entire occupational health and safety apparatus.

Epstein states that “industry, like labor, represents a heterogeneous array of interests and objectives. Such diversity, however, tends to be replaced by a common front of intransigence in response to proposed regulation of toxic and carcinogenic chemicals.” He doesn’t recognize, however, the root of this common front: the fact of common class interest. Thus his recommendations tend to appeal to industry’s “long range interest” in workers’ health rather than recognizing that profits and exploitation are industry’s long and short range interest. Health considerations must always stand last under capitalism.

While Epstein also acknowledges Soviet (he calls them “Russian”) studies that anticipated health effects of many substances (e.g., vinyl chloride and red dye #2), he fails to see how the class bias of the state makes the difference. The Soviet Union has had chronic toxicity testing of all workplace substances since World War II, and it has an extensive network of occupational health and safety institutes. This might be one factor explaining why their cancer rate is only 75 per cent of ours.

Despite these criticisms, the book is well worth buying. The factual information, the selected quotes and the explanations make it a valuable tool of political struggle around all health care. I highly recommend it.

NOTE
Al Stone holds a doctorate in molecular biology and is a cancer researcher.