

Remembering Tony Mazzocchi

by Dave Zwick

Last October, Clean Water Action – and all who care about a safer and more just world – lost a close friend and visionary partner to cancer. Tony Mazzocchi was a leader in the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW, which merged with the paperworkers in 1999 to form a union called PACE). He was one of the first to call attention to the injustices of an industrial system that endangers workers' health both on the job and in the community. He believed – and acted effectively on the belief – that the path to solutions lies in building alliances between workers, environmentalists and community residents to transform conditions that ultimately threaten all of humanity. His tireless advocacy over five decades spurred creation of the modern workplace health and safety movement, sparked environmental groups' increased emphasis on health harm from toxic chemicals, and forged labor-environmental partnerships that produced many of those movements' most important victories.

Early on, Mazzocchi helped to expose the potentially deadly impacts of the manufacture and testing of nuclear weapons, and of the fledgling nuclear energy industry. He collected baby teeth from children of families with workers who belonged to his Long Island, New York union local for testing by Dr. Barry Commoner. The analysis revealed alarming accumulations of radioactive strontium 90 from atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Later, Mazzocchi helped whistle-blower Karen Silkwood tell her story of shocking nuclear industry indifference to health and safety concerns.

Mazzocchi was a key leader, along with Ralph Nader and others, in the campaign to create a federal workplace safety agency, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, with the ambitious goal of creating hazard-free workplaces. He was also a driving force in developing occupational and environmental health as respected scientific, medical and academic disciplines, and was committed to continuing education for union workers and for other professionals active in these new fields.

His crusade against “dead bodies” epidemiology as the basis for action on environmental health harm – the dominant paradigm by which a substance or practice must be shown to cause sickness or death before preventive steps can be taken – laid the foundation for work to advance the precautionary principle as a more just alternative. CWA and partners' Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow coalition in Massachusetts and their cutting edge campaign to protect child health in Massachusetts by phasing out some of the worst toxic chemicals are direct descendants of Mazzocchi's vision for vibrant alliances working effectively for fundamental change.

Mazzocchi conceived and helped develop the “right to know” and “right to act” concepts – that people exposed to a dangerous chemical have the right to know what the hazard is and how to protect themselves, and the right to take preventive action. These rights are now partly codified in local, state and federal laws (many passed with CWA's help) and are credited with bringing more reduction in toxic exposures than all other measures combined. Mazzocchi also pioneered the “just transition” movement, which pushes for phase-out of toxic hazards and for polluter-paid transitions to a safer economy, including assistance and education for displaced workers.