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## Stop the N-worker delays

**Compensation should be fair, but it must also be timely**

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It wouldn't be too far-fetched for someone to believe that the government is waiting for the former nuclear weapons workers at the Bethlehem Steel uranium rolling plant in Lackawanna to die off, rather than properly reimburse them. A federal advisory board once again has delayed a decision on whether to speed up compensation to these workers, or to the survivors of the ones who are no longer with us. If the delays continue, the people who directly suffer most won't see any financial relief.

The Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health's delay resulted after discussion of whether government health and radiation experts legally could use data on radiation levels taken from the former Simonds Saw Steel plant in Lockport to determine possible radiation exposure levels at the Lackawanna plant. The group will wait until the board's June 11 meeting in Denver to revisit the issue.

Meanwhile, many of the workers — who had no idea that they were handling highly sensitive material at the Lackawanna plant while rolling uranium into bars for processing at other nuclear weapons sites in the late 1940s and early 1950s — are suffering severe illnesses. Those who are still alive.

The \$150,000 in compensation — a medical payment package to workers whose health was damaged by exposure to radiation, or to their survivors — seems at least appropriate. Sometime in this decade would be preferable.

But National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and its laborious reconstruction process, in which the agency tries to figure out whether individual workers qualify for the compensation based on estimates of the amount of radiation they were exposed to and the types of cancer they contracted, is adding up to a legality-driven chess game. With this troubling addition — just continue moving all the pieces around the board, and eventually there are no more players.

As Frank Panasuk, a spokesman for the Bethlehem Steel Radiation Victims and Survivors, said, the government is doing everything it can do to keep from paying the claims, despite a letter to the board from five members of New York's congressional delegation — Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Charles E. Schumer, and Reps. Brian Higgins, Thomas M. Reynolds and Louise M. Slaughter — requesting approval of the workers' application.

It's a further tragedy, not to mention an injustice, that these workers and their survivors have not been compensated for the irreversible harm that was done to them without so much as a warning.

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