

ASBESTOS

Between 1945 and 1955, Australian production of fibro sheeting from asbestos cement trebled from 8 to 23 million square metres. By 1961, one house in six was fibro. The self-builder favoured this material because it was cheap, easy to apply and available. The advertising said nothing about harms. Asbestos installed in multi-storey blocks as a fire retardant menaced the office workers. (By the 1980s, vermiculite provided an alternative.) At even greater risk were the labourers sent in to strip asbestos covering which owners claimed were dangerous only if disturbed.

When Victorian Health officials examined 300 asbestos workers in 1952, one in three had fibres in their sputum, and half of those had positive X-ray findings. Five years later, the researcher reported the results in the *Medical Journal of Australia*:

The pulmonary fibrosis of asbestos workers is insidious in its onset, irregular in its course, and variable in its termination; but once established it constitutes a grave threat to life and health.

He defended his findings on the grounds that he preferred not to wait until his patients were dying before confirming their symptoms. He encouraged men to quit the industry, advice which more of them were heeding:

The realisation that their friend who was supposed to have a weak heart for a long time is actually suffering from asbestosis and is eligible for compensation is making most workers very conscious of the hazard.

More of those who stayed were wearing masks, although the occasional dill pushed his coat into an exhaust apparatus because he “didn’t like the draught”. While the Health Department officer waited for the government to gazette stringent regulations, he stressed that workers had to protect themselves.¹

In 1967, New South Wales added asbestosis to the conditions covered by its Compensation Act. Late next year, newspaper reports of a US survey sparked the ACTU to call for an investigation into the dangers of working with asbestos products. In Queensland, rank-and-file labourers took up the concern as the Building Trades Group promoted awareness of the mass murderer in their midst. In 1970, a second US study revealed alarming death rates. When that investigation had started in 1943 with 632 workers, the researchers had expected 251 deaths from all causes by 1967. Instead, 349 had died. Mortality was almost 100 more than the prediction.² Queensland building unions put out an “ASBESTOS KILLS” leaflet. Queensland set limits on emissions in 1971, followed in other States by 1979. The supposition was that workers could swallow a few fibres without risk proved fatal since there was no safe level.³

¹ D. L. Gordon Thomas, “Pneumonokoniosis in Victorian Industry”, *Medical Journal of Australia (MJA)*, 19 January 1957, pp. 75-77.

² *Australian*, 22 October 1968, p. 11g; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 1970, p. 3h-i; Robert Barnes, “Asbestos and Malignant Disease”, *MJA*, 11 November 1972, pp. 1107-12; *MJA*, 20 January 1973, p. 92; P. W. J. Bartrip, *Beyond the factory gates: asbestos and health in twentieth-century America*, Continuum, London, 2006.

³ The Industries Assistance Commission denied a 1979 claim for tariff protection from an asbestos miner on free trade, not health grounds, Report on Asbestos, Australia, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1980, v. 11, no. 231.

The cover of the first issue the Lidcombe's Workers Health Centre's newsletter, *Work Hazards*, in October 1977, headlined "The Great Asbestos Conspiracy". Its perpetrators were the businesses that pervaded the building sector as thoroughly as asbestos did the lungs of its victims. Master Builders and developers accepted assurances from the manufacturers because they shared in the advantages from using asbestos products. Builders adopted the cheapest and hence most murderous methods of working the material. The cover-up was typical of the ways in which capitalists and their state approach workplace safety. The employers began by denying a problem, while their governments did nothing. Under union pressure, the politicians got around to adopting a few rules but did little to enforce them. Throughout, the profit-takers lied – and not just Hardie or the mining companies. Building corporations, such as Hollands, were on the front-line by making unprotected labourers work with asbestos/cement sheeting into the 1980s.⁴ The 1978 ABLF Award included a provision to protect labourers working with or near asbestos, but was limited to the safeguards in force in each State and did not insist on a breathing apparatus. The Federation, however, was about to write its own standards.

Stirring the ACT

In the ACT, the ABLF led the battle for the safe removal of asbestos from public buildings and private dwellings. Branch Secretary Peter O'Dea accepted that his union was too small to win by itself, and so built relationships with the white-collar unions covering librarians, public servants and teachers, becoming President of the Trades and Labor Council. When O'Dea had arrived from South Australia in 1976 to revive the ACT Branch, he had few finances and no office, or even an answering machine. To sign up members and collect dues, the Victorians lent him a vehicle. He determined to overcome these weaknesses by action on the jobs: "Unions and officials are supposed to 'stir' for a living." The best of intentions could not surmount the lack of resources in one hit.

O'Dea recalled that he had become aware of the threat from asbestos in 1975 after seeing a US video. His first encounter in Canberra came in 1977-78 at Chisholm High School which was constructed almost entirely out of asbestos cement sheeting. The union raised the problem, "in a fairly general way" for construction workers, but "we didn't really know what it meant for school children." Even this mild concern provoked a reaction from the serial killers selling a product which they knew to be deadly:

First thing we knew, there was a virtual plane load of James Hardie executives arriving in Canberra with all these facts and fictions to confuse and bemuse us. I regret to say, the issue largely died. They agreed to some token concessions such as setting up a separate area – an isolated area. This was not proper isolation in terms of air filtration, but just an area where asbestos would be cut and drilled. They said they would clean up the waste too. It was as general as that and I think if we're going to be honest we have to say the whole thing was a farce.

The building and educational authorities had the resources to find out why asbestos sheeting should never have been used. Instead, they put labourers, teachers and students at risk.

The ACT Branch learned as it went along. Unlike the government, it proved to be a quick study about asbestos. O'Dea became alarmed in 1978 when workers on the Police Academy were told to use angle grinders to make the sheeting fit the eaves. They "were

⁴ *Builders' Labourers' Federation Journal (BLFJ)*, May 1983, p. 23.

as white as Father Christmas.” Blue asbestos was removed from Canberra’s ABC studios in 1979. The experts assured the labourers that cartridge respirators and laundering their overalls was enough protection if the asbestos were hosed down. By 1983, O’Dea complained:

Now we know that those aren’t stringent precautions. In general, our experience has been that there has been enormous suppression of information about the hazards of asbestos dust and we’re only starting to break through that now. We’ve been conned for a long time.

Even with testimony from the Workers’ Health Centre in Lidcombe, the ABLF found it hard to convince government officials. The National Library covered up the hazards because the costs of removal would run into the millions. The *Canberra Times* abused the union for refusing to compromise with “the purveyors of powdered death.” The BLs were not for turning:

It’s annoying that the problems of asbestos poison have been known and so well documented for 50 years or more, and have been so well suppressed that we’re fighting a campaign now that should have been concluded. That means that we’re actually missing out on other hazards that we’re not even game to think about at the moment because we don’t have the resources.

It’s indicative of the employer and government attitudes to occupational health that the unions are having to fight such bitter campaigns about things now that should belong to the era of Dickens.

O’Dea could not praise the Lidcombe Workers Health Centre too highly:

We’ve been babes in the wood in terms of occupational health and it’s tremendous to have an organisation which knows something for one thing, is sympathetic for two, and is available to some extent for the third.

Labourers had discovered that half-measures had no place when dealing with asbestos. Their union insisted that all cutting and drilling of asbestos-cement be done in the factory. When John Holland built a sport stadium in Canberra, the Branch made the firm send sheets back to Sydney.⁵ Victory seemed complete. The company paid for the Lidcombe Workers’ Health Centre to test each labourer. All cutting and drilling would be in controlled environments. Other builders accepted the new rules. Indeed, the Parliament House Authority “agreed to have no sheeting on the job at all.”⁶ At the time, newspaper editors abused the Branch as extremists. The employers used the union’s hard line on asbestos as one more ground for de-registration.

“You’re killers – all of you”

The South Australian Branch took the next step in 1981 by appointing one of its organisers, Jack Watkins, to supervise removal. The first job involved 12 men and women. Their work area was sealed with double-layer plastic. Extractor fans kept a negative air pressure to stop any dust leaking out. The labourers donned space suits with breathing masks. Each time they exited the danger area, they went through two sets of showers, the first to hose down their clothing, and the second to scour their bodies. Half-

⁵ *Work Hazards*, 15, June 1983, pp. 7-9; Australian Building and Construction Employees’ and Builders’ Labourers’ Federation Records, ACT Branch, Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), Z342 Boxes 1-8 and 15.

⁶ *BLFJ*, May 1983, p. 23.

a-dozen showers a day made them the cleanest BLs in the world. They were also among the first in Australia to be spared the agonies from working with asbestos. The Branch allowed only specialist contractors with the necessary equipment to do the stripping, after negotiations job by job.⁷ During 1982, the South Australians urged the removal of blue asbestos from the ceilings of the State's hospitals. Frustrated at the government's inaction, Watkins went to a parliamentary sitting on 16 September. As he threw sealed bags of asbestos fibres at two cabinet ministers, he cried out: "You're killers, all of you."⁸

The Federation called for nation-wide legislation to make the SA Branch practice the national standard. Next year, renovations at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology exposed the failure of employers to follow even such rules as existed. A stoppage over amenities revealed asbestos sheathing on the pipes, confirmed by the Workers' Health Centre. The contractor had breached his obligation to give 30 days prior notification of any work in areas with asbestos. Equally disturbing was the decision from the Building Industry Disputes Board, which referred to working with asbestos as "a contentious issue", as if there were some doubt about its deadliness. The Board then revealed why only action on the jobs backed by militant officials could save lives:

The Board considers that the M.B.A. should take immediate action to circularise their members of an appropriate procedure when contracts for renovations and repairs to buildings are being processed to establish whether or not asbestos is present and to ensure that the regulations are observed.⁹

There was not a word about enforcement, still less about penalties, just a wink and a nudge to the employers' body to pass on information. By contrast, the Victorian Branch had put asbestos up front by designating an organiser as its Asbestos and Safety Officer.¹⁰

When the MBAV got around to holding a seminar on asbestos in May 1986, the technical expert who spoke did the usual trick of sowing confusion. He argued that the existing measurements were not always appropriate or accurate:

If the exposure is reduced, the risk is reduced; while the risk can be extremely small – much smaller than other risks run in everyday life – it cannot be zero unless the exposure is zero. Thus, a situation of potential asbestos exposure is not clear-cut; there are no easy distinctions between "safe" and "dangerous".¹¹

The distinction was clear-cut: there was no safe level. The difficulty was in protecting the labourers who had to remove asbestos because best practice ate into profits. Faced with the greed of the employers and the gutlessness of the regulators, the ABLF backed the total ban that the building unions had placed on working with asbestos. The Federation's stand could not have been clearer: "DO NOT WORK WITH ASBESTOS", and it circulated the warning in six languages, for example, *Asbesto La Fibra Mortal*. When labourers enforced that rule on unionised sites, the NSW Royal Commissioner in 1992 accused them of "salting" sites – as if there were buildings free of the stuff.¹²

⁷ *BLFJ*, November 1981, pp. 14-15.

⁸ *Advertiser*, 17 September 1982, p. 1; for Watkins's continuing efforts, *Unity*, December 1985, p. 18.

⁹ *BLFJ*, September 1982, p. 17.

¹⁰ *BLFJ*, October 1983, pp. 13-15; *Unity*, July 1984, pp. 17-19; March-April 1985, pp. 14-19; August 1985, p. 13.

¹¹ *Builder (SA)*, April 1986, p. 22.

¹² NSW Royal Commission into the Productivity of the Building Industry, NSW, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1992-3, volume XX1, Paper 272, p. 297.

Cost-cutting through speed-ups kept the danger ever-present.¹³ For instance, roof repairs after the 1999 Sydney hailstorm were a flash point. Such jobs were supposed not to start without notices confirming that all asbestos had been removed. Several builders bought bogus certificates.¹⁴ The spread of “self-employed” operators on renovations renewed the threat.¹⁵

Gideon Haigh’s 2006 account of James Hardie – *Asbestos House* - attacked some union officials as “accomplices”. That allegation nailed the AWU for its addiction to sidling up to employers to win coverage. Haigh failed to notice any of the efforts of the building unions sampled above. The ignorance of a flannelled fool is more forgivable than is his beating up on a young official from a regional Labour Council who was put off the track by a health expert. That organiser had few resources and faced hostile authorities.¹⁶ The source of irresponsibility is beyond dispute. Some 35 years after building unions took a stand against the asbestos plague, the Federal government banned the import of chrysolite asbestos from 2003. Worse still, the 2005 Building and Construction Industry and Improvement Act criminalised union efforts to eradicate asbestos and other killers.

Framework of Flesh, builders Labourers battle for health and safety, Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, 2009, pp. 134-40.

Humphrey McQueen

¹³ *Work Hazards*, May 1988, pp. 9-14.

¹⁴ *NSCA’s Australian Safety*, November 2000, p. 51.

¹⁵ *National Safety*, September 2007, p. 6, February 2008, pp. 27-29.

¹⁶ Gideon Haigh, *Asbestos House, James Hardie*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 403-4.