Asbestos industry—corporate murder on a global scale

“You will know them by their trail of death”—an investigation into the asbestos industry

Review of a Real Life documentary produced in the UK for ITN television.

14 September 2004

This documentary, broadcast in August, is about corporate murder, premeditated and on a massive scale. Widows Joan Baird and Pauline Bonney listen to a haunting song about the epidemic of asbestos deaths that is an international scandal. The words of “He Fades Away” bring the heartache back. Joan lost her husband, William, seven years ago to asbestos-induced mesothelioma. Pauline’s husband, John, succumbed to the same deadly form of cancer five years previously. ITN followed the quest of these two courageous women as they investigate the reasons why their loved ones had died—a journey that takes them to disused, though still contaminated, asbestos factories, and all the way to the mines in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. Wherever they travel, they uncover a trail of death.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that is found in Canada, Australia and Africa. It is light, strong, durable, non-combustible and cheap. It is also highly carcinogenic, as deadly as radiation. Its danger to health was recognised as long ago as 1898. The first legislation controlling the production of asbestos in Britain was in 1931, and in 1960 the link between asbestosis and mesothelioma was proved incontrovertibly in a paper in the *British Journal of Medicine*. Nevertheless, this hazardous material has been widely used in the building industry throughout the last century. In the UK, its use in homes was not totally prohibited until 1999.

When exposed to the air asbestos crumbles into tiny fibres, which if inhaled may present as one of a variety of terminal illnesses 15 to 60 years later. Asbestos causes asbestosis (scarring of the lung tissue), lung cancer, mesothelioma (cancer of the sac surrounding the lungs), pleural disease (including calcification of the lungs), and pleural effusion (water on the lungs). A patient with mesothelioma faces the worst prognosis—75 percent of such sufferers die within a year of diagnosis. Asbestos is also associated with cancer of the oesophagus, stomach, colon and rectum.

Those most at risk from exposure to asbestos include workers involved in mining it: builders, electricians, painters, and shipyard workers together with their families, as well as teachers, children and nurses who spend a lot of time in public buildings where it was widely used. Until the 1980s, asbestos was also used in many household appliances, including hairdryers and ironing board covers, and even in baby powder.

In the documentary, Pauline Bonney takes x-rays of her husband’s diseased lungs to UK cancer specialist Dr. Ken O’Byrne. He tells her that while a low level of exposure to asbestos is less likely to produce morbidity, there is no such thing as a safe level of contamination.

In the UK, 50,000 people have died since 1968 after exposure to asbestos. The numbers of asbestos-related deaths is averaging 3,500 per annum, although it is predicted that this figure will rise to 10,000 in 2010. It is estimated that the total of asbestos-related deaths will reach 150,000. In the United States, there are 10,000 asbestos-related deaths each year. Halliburton, the energy firm formerly headed by US Vice President Dick Cheney, faces 300,000 compensation claims totalling over $4 billion from people who have been affected by asbestos in its former products.

The number of deaths in South Africa, according to the programme, is entirely unknown. There has never been a prosecution or health and safety inquiry into a single asbestos-related death of a worker in South Africa. Such deaths are officially recorded as being due to natural causes. The link between asbestos and cancer is well known by the companies and South African government. Cape Asbestos funded a study into the effects asbestos has on health in 1960, the results of which were suppressed by the government. The study revealed

© World Socialist Web Site

that just living in Prieska, a town near an asbestos mine in the Northern Cape, was a major health hazard.

In the documentary, Pauline Bonney, who as yet has received no compensation for her husband's death, visits the possible site of his contamination. As a 19-year-old, John lagged electrical wiring in London's Opera House. He also worked with asbestos at the BBC. Joan Baird's husband worked as a welder in the shipyards on the Clyde in Glasgow, an area that has the UK's greatest concentration of asbestos-related deaths. Thousands of workers must have been exposed to the dust on the shipyards. And they would have carried the dust home with them on their clothing, thus inadvertently exposing their families to danger. Nearby, on Clydeside, there used to be an asbestos factory owned by Turner and Newall. Joan learns that though there was research into the number of cancer deaths and links with asbestos at the factory, this was never shared with the workforce. No one informed either William Baird or John Bonney of the risks associated with working with asbestos.

Later on in the programme, UK lawyer John Pickering from Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, who has represented dozens of claimants seeking compensation for their asbestos-related illnesses, reiterates this state of affairs. Hebden Bridge was the site of a Cape asbestos factory that closed 30 years ago. Pickering indicates a criminal conspiracy of silence when he explains that companies and governments have known since the 1920s that asbestos causes serious illness, yet the public and workforce were never made aware of this.

Though the supply and use of asbestos were almost entirely banned in the UK in the 1980s, this did not end the danger of new contamination. There are approximately 4.5 million premises both industrial and domestic containing asbestos in the building material. When these buildings begin to deteriorate, asbestos fibres may be released. In May of this year, new regulations came into force imposing a new duty on all building managers to check and control the asbestos in their buildings. However, homes are excluded from the legislation, with the sole exception of communal areas in flats.

Joan visits some flats in the East Kilbride area of Scotland. Robert Cleland shows Joan his bathroom. The fibreboard walls contain 40 percent blue asbestos, and he has drilled into them, exposing the deadly fibres. He was sold the flat by the local council, but was never told about the asbestos content.

Joan and Pauline visited some flats at Barking in the UK. Cape International had a factory on the site that was closed in 1969, and regardless of the contamination, flats were built on it. Eddie Ashdown explains that his mother who lived on the estate died of mesothelioma. Thirty years after the factory had been closed, particles of asbestos were still being found. Eddie's mother was awarded compensation.

Many of the sufferers do not know where they picked up the disease. The women visited 51-year-old Anne Begg, a former hospital worker from Dundee. After going to hospital feeling pains in her chest, she was told a week later, over the telephone, that she had only one to two years to live. Anne never found out where she had been in contact with the asbestos that caused her disease. She died just days after she was filmed.

Their search for the truth takes Joan and Pauline to the asbestos-mining region of the Northern Cape in South Africa, where they are horrified by what they find. There are literally dozens of disused mines contaminating the environment, as well as buildings like a local church made with asbestos that has asbestos fibres hanging from the walls.

At the asbestos sites in the mountains, lawyer Richard Spoor shows them how the fibres are exposed to the elements and washed down the mountainside by the rain to contaminate the valleys beneath.

There is an enormous incidence of asbestos-related disease in the area. In the town of Prieska, one in seven of the population is affected. Undertaker Rudie Van Heerden explains that two out of every three people he buries have died as a result of asbestos contamination.

The UK firm Turner and Newall until 1979 operated 79 asbestos mills in South Africa. Six percent of its workers were children younger than seven years old. No safety regulations were employed or respiratory equipment provided.

When people began to submit claims for compensation, firms like Anglo American, which owned Cape International, simply hived off its subsidiary to avoid liability. In the face of growing compensation claims, Turner and Newall, sold to an American company, was then put into insolvency administration, which means it can make much lower payouts. Cape plc made a much-reduced settlement with South African sufferers on the grounds that the alternative was insolvency.

Since the use of asbestos was banned in many western countries, the trade in death has moved to the underdeveloped world. Canada exports 300,000 tons of white chrysolite asbestos each year to countries like India, Chile and Thailand, where it is processed without safety controls or the use of respirators. The Canadian government, with the support of Russia, the largest producer of asbestos, and 13 other asbestos-producing countries, managed last year to block the consideration of a worldwide ban on the import of white chrysolite.

Meanwhile, thousands of people will inhale the deadly fibres and later die from an asbestos-related disease.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site