

New York City transit workers exposed to toxic asbestos for decades

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Workers at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) East New York bus depot in Brooklyn, New York are outraged over a report revealing that transit employees at the site have been exposed for decades to asbestos, a carcinogen. At least 20 high school student interns may also have been exposed.

The workers expressed to the *World Socialist Web Site* their anger over the fact that the problem has been ignored by MTA management and their union, and that they are still being told next to nothing.

Asbestos, the use of which has been severely restricted since the 1970s due to serious health concerns, was installed in the form of cloth in the building's air vents, apparently for sound-dampening, when it was constructed in 1947 or in subsequent upgrades in the 1960s.

A fibrous material, once widely used in industry, including as insulation and a fire-retardant asbestos, is friable, meaning that it can easily break up into small particles which can become airborne when disturbed. Once inhaled, it settles into the lungs, remaining lodged permanently, causing damage to the tissues, and resulting in a disease known as asbestosis. Symptoms include shortness of breath, chest tightness, persistent dry cough and chest pain. It can lead to respiratory failure and death. There is no cure.

Asbestosis can also cause mesothelioma, a malignant tumor, which may not develop for decades after exposure. Life expectancy following diagnosis is approximately 12 months.

The presence of asbestos in the depot's air vents, which have been subject to constant mechanical stresses for more than a half century, means that this material has been and continues to be dispersed throughout the building, subjecting workers to daily exposure over decades.

The dangerous situation regarding asbestos in the air vents was first exposed last month by the *Daily News*. It

has reportedly been known to MTA officials since early this year, but was not made known to the workers. Asbestos contamination was previously identified in the building's boiler room in 2017. It was not removed until August of 2018.

According to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), "When an active employee has been identified as having been overexposed to asbestos, measures taken by the employer to eliminate or mitigate further exposure should also lower the risk of serious long-term consequences."

Furthermore, "The employer is required to institute a medical surveillance program for all employees who are or will be exposed to asbestos at or above the permissible exposure limit (0.1 fiber per cubic centimeter of air). All examinations and procedures must be performed by or under the supervision of a licensed physician, at a reasonable time and place, and at no cost to the employee."

The MTA has stated that the asbestos in the depot is not dangerous, despite having posted signs warning, "DO NOT DISTURB OR TOUCH THE VIBRATION CLOTH. THE VIBRATION CLOTH MATERIALS ON THIS UNIT CONTAINS ASBESTOS."

Work on the ventilation system last February revealed that some cloths were frayed and that dust, likely containing asbestos fragments, was being dispersed into the building. Additional locations of damaged cloth were identified in August. An internal MTA memo, cited by the *Daily News*, reported that workers with no protective equipment were ordered to sweep the asbestos-laden dust from the floor. Nevertheless, a city-hired consultant had previously "confirmed no friable asbestos" was present in the system.

According to the latest accounts, the MTA has reportedly ordered closing of some vents following the recent news report, while still publicly maintaining that

there is no danger. Only the roughly 20 ventilation units which have so far tested positive for asbestos will be shut down, and the cloth removed. Other units will remain in operation. No comprehensive remediation (i.e., removal of the asbestos) throughout the system will be undertaken.

The MTA has so far failed to institute an asbestos monitoring program for employees at the depot, and publicly continues to assert that conditions are safe. Most workers have not been made aware of the hazard. This is criminal negligence that clearly expresses the MTA's utter disregard for worker safety.

Asbestos is likely present at many other older MTA facilities. Disturbed asbestos has now been reported at the Concourse Rail Yard in The Bronx.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers at the East New York depot. Many were extremely upset but had little information. Several did not know about the asbestos at all, and one said that she had only heard about it on the news.

Shawn said about the asbestos, "It is bad, but you sort of expect this with old buildings. They [the MTA] are not making an issue about it because it is just like anything that has to do with money. We are considered the bottom of the barrel. We are a lesser priority to them."

Asked for his thoughts about the lack of response from the Democratic Party and Transport Workers Union (TWU), he added, "All politics is like this. We are the little guy and we have to look out for ourselves. The union is no better and is not for us. Whether you are talking about politics, the union or religion you have people with their own agenda.

"At transit they are always trying to put fear in us. You see this with things like the Taylor Law [which makes it illegal for transit workers to strike]. I would rather strike and lose something in the short term but have a long-term impact than to just have things get worse."

Deedra, a transit worker with 25 years of experience, said, "The news about the asbestos is horrible. They are saying it is low levels, but over time this can really affect you."

William, another worker at East New York, said, "They are coming in now to do something, but this was allowed to happen because nobody was staying on top of it. If they are saying it is 'safe' it just shows that they don't care about the workers here. This stuff is just poison, and it is putting us and our families in danger."

Mr. T, a bus operator for 10 years, said, "I am just hearing about this. The TA [Transit Authority] is claiming that the quality of air is good now. Even if that is true, it

doesn't mean that it was good. They should be checking the quality of our lungs since the asbestos might be in us, and we don't know it."

Darryl, a bus operator for 25 years, stated, "They haven't given us much information. The TA posted a sign saying that an inspection would be done, but an inspection was never done. All these large organizations are all the same. They want to keep the worker uninformed."

Another worker voiced what was on the minds all the workers, "Anything to do with the lungs is serious business."

As soon as the possibility of asbestos contamination was first revealed back in 2017, and certainly by February of this year, when the damaged air vent cloths were discovered, the TWU, which supposedly represents the affected workers, should have immediately demanded that the MTA undertake comprehensive testing throughout the building to identify all contaminated locations, conduct remediation, and institute medical monitoring of workers, and launch strike action if this was not done.

However, only now, two years later, once the serious situation has been publicly revealed, has the union taken notice of the danger faced by the workers, via empty statements at a news conference with local Democratic politicians.

The dangerous, antiquated condition of the East New York bus depot is only one symptom of the severely deteriorated condition of the New York City transit system and the financial crisis of its parent, the MTA. Lack of investment over decades has brought the system to near collapse. While New York City is home to largest number of billionaires in the world, its infrastructure, including its transportation system, is falling apart, and the working class is paying the price.

Workers cannot rely on the unions or Democrats to defend their health and safety, let alone their economic wellbeing. The only way forward is to form independent, rank-and-file committees to fight for a socialist program to include a complete modernization of the public transportation system.



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