

Asbestos in UK schools responsible for 10,000 deaths in four decades

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As many as 10,000 UK school teachers, pupils and school staff have died of lung cancer caused by asbestos exposure in school buildings in the past 40 years, according to an investigation by the *Sunday Times*.

Asbestos is a building material used as a fire retardant and heat insulator. It was widely employed during the postwar construction boom when many homes and schools were built in the UK. A 2019 Department for Education (DfE) survey of 20,000 schools in the UK estimated that about 81 percent of them contained asbestos.

Despite its useful properties, asbestos poses significant health risks for humans, especially after prolonged exposure—though there is no “safe” level of asbestos exposure. When inhaled, asbestos fibers damage the lungs and can lead to scarring and inflammation and, in many cases, malignant mesothelioma, an aggressive tumor for which there is no effective treatment.

While the time between exposure to asbestos and the emergence of actual illness can be quite long (up to 40 years), once someone is diagnosed with mesothelioma, the average life expectancy is about 12 months. Over 4,000 people in the UK are killed by the disease each year.

The effects of asbestos have been known for a long time (the first documented death related to the substance was in 1906), but the material was only banned in the UK in 1999. Britain has the highest mesothelioma incidence in the world—more than twice that of France, Germany, or the United States.

The type of asbestos most commonly used in UK schools—generally known as “white” asbestos—does not emit fibers unless it is disturbed. However, as more and more schools are falling into disrepair, the risk that

parts of buildings containing asbestos will be damaged, either by roof collapse or renovation work, is growing. There is no register recording which schools contain asbestos and where in the building.

Many teachers and children are daily exposed to asbestos when going to school, virtually guaranteeing that a significant number of them will contract mesothelioma later in life. This is doubly true for children, who are more vulnerable to lung cancer from asbestos than adults.

Since the risk of mesothelioma accumulates over time, a five-year-old child who is exposed to asbestos is estimated to be, according to a 2013 DfE report, five times more likely to develop mesothelioma during their lifetime than an adult who is first exposed at the age of 30. Despite this, schools in the UK are not obligated to inform parents if the school contains asbestos—and in many cases will not even be aware themselves that their buildings are potential death traps.

The *Times* recounted the case of PE Teacher Chris Willis, who was diagnosed with mesothelioma at 29 after being exposed to asbestos while attending the Kenton School in Newcastle as a child. “You don’t expect to go to school, get an education and come out with what I’ve got,” he said. He died last year, at the age of just 34.

In April 2022, a UK Work and Pensions Select Committee (WPSC) report recommended that the government establish a register of asbestos and start a program of gradually removing it from all buildings, starting with “high-risk” ones such as schools. The Health and Safety Executive of the government rejected both recommendations, which would have cost and estimated £11.4 billion, claiming that the risk of exposure is minimal if properly managed and that the “rush to remove asbestos” would pose more of a risk

than letting it stay where it is.

This claim was contradicted a few months later when a report by the Asbestos Testing and Consultancy Association revealed that “Of the 710,433 items of asbestos found, 507,612 (71 percent) were recorded as having some level of damage.”

The government further stated that it is the responsibility of school staff to “manage” the risk, by “covering up” areas containing asbestos and ensuring that it is not disturbed. Tests have shown that this is not an effective strategy, however, as the asbestos is often not in good condition, or it is unsealed and hidden. They have also shown that it can be disturbed by normal school activity, with asbestos fibers released over the course of many years without anyone being aware of it.

The government’s own guidance on how to “manage” asbestos in schools relates an incident where, “In one school, a laboratory technician installed an IT cable through a ceiling void, putting holes through fire barriers and walls and contaminating most ceiling voids throughout the building. It was 9 months before the exposure was spotted by a surveyor.”

Electrical work done in another school led to the contamination with asbestos of “everything from computers, files and records to pupils’ coursework.”

Thousands of teachers and pupils are being condemned to an early grave by this cruel, penny-pinching indifference. It can be safely assumed that cases like the ones described above have happened many times and will continue to happen. It amounts to nothing less than social murder.

The *Times* report concludes by proposing a five-point plan for addressing this crisis and appealing to the government to implement it. Its suggestions are mostly a re-hash of the Work and Pensions Committee recommendations, including: “draw up a national strategy for the planned removal of all asbestos over the next 40 years”, creating a digital register for people to check if any building contains asbestos, and introducing air quality controls around buildings that monitor asbestos fibers.

While these are important, if inadequate, steps, it is pointless to expect a government that let 220,000 people die in the Covid-19 pandemic to spend anything on protecting the health and safety of workers and children, especially when that money could be used for

the ongoing NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The teacher unions have made some pro-forma statements criticising the government but have not proposed any plan for teachers and school staff to fight for their health and lives.

NASUWT general secretary Dr Patrick Roach said, “This is needlessly and avoidably passing on a potentially deadly legacy to the staff and children working and learning in our schools today.” Yet the only proposal from the union is working with Wpsc committee chairman Sir Stephen Timms to raise demands in parliament.

That the *Times*, a right-wing Murdoch newspaper, has made more of a fuss over this issue than the union bureaucracy is indicative of its contemptuous attitude towards its members. As far as the trade unions are concerned, as long as they can collect their dues from, nothing else matters, even if workers end up dying prematurely of a preventable cause.

The only way for school staff and parents to secure the resources necessary to protect their health and their lives—as well as pay and conditions—is to organise their own independent rank-and-file committees as the bedrock of a struggle against the government. For further information, sign up to the Educators Newsletter and contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee.



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