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Strikers Enter Pollution Debate

By STU CHAPMAN
Home News Staff Writer

MANVILLE — The sound and the fury of the environmental pollution debate has left hardly a place in the country untouched or unaffected in one way or another.

This borough is no exception and the charts posted at strike headquarters across the street from the Johns-Manville Corp tell the story.

So do 58 to 60 employes of Local 800 of the United Paperworkers and Papermakers, AFL-CIO, who have reportedly been incapacitated by symptoms of a disease which doctors across the country have linked to the inhalation of asbestos dust and fibers.

Incurable

It is a disease of the lungs, incurable, irreversible, terribly disabling often fatal. It manifests itself gradually after a person has been exposed to the particles of asbestos for about 10 to 20 years.

Most of the employes laid off by the disease or its symptoms have been exposed to asbestos particles in the plant, for 20 years or more, according to union officials, and cannot work a full day. One of the demands of the union is for increased protection for workers in the plant from asbestos particles which are said to circulate freely in certain areas.

The workers in the plant who have the most direct contact with asbestos — a material extensively used for fireproofing purposes — are said to be equipped with respirators because they in some cases have to shovel the material into mixers. But Robert Klinger, vice president of the union, said other employes who work in adjacent areas of the plant are less protected and exposed to the dust.

"The company isn't allowed to take the material and leave it at the town dump but workers have to shovel the stuff back into the mixers," he said.

Physicians' Study

The union played an influential role in publicizing a study done two years ago by a group of physicians associated with Middlesex General and Somerset Hospitals. The exhibition — now on display at the strike headquarters — includes a series of greatly enlarged color projections depicting the clinical course radiographic picture and gross and microscopic features of mesothelioma, a little known and rare form of cancer.

Under the provisions of the current contract, employes who are incapacitated may be "laid off" for two years, at which time their employment is terminated. The union has demanded that this period be extended to five years.

Hazards Told

While the union has been keenly attuned to the dangers of the substance, its hazards to the public, most particularly in the cities, has only recently been told. In the spraying of buildings with asbestos to make them fireproof, 50 per cent of the material is said to escape into the air.

The situation has become so alarming in New York City, for example, that the city's administration has taken steps to regulate the use of asbestos spray.

Some experts on the effects of asbestos have indicated that where there are higher concentrations of the material a breathing apparatus with an independent air supply would be required instead of the present filter masks most commonly used.

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