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THE SILICOSIS PROBLEM

Out of the National Conference on Silicosis held recently at Washington emerges the gratifying fact that even now it is possible to cope with deadly rock dust. It is good to note that the representative of labor at Washington insisted that the workers in the dusty trades are more interested in saving their lungs than in obtaining compensation for disability, and that employers would rather improve the conditions under which dust is of necessity generated than subject themselves to the harassing tactics of the ambulance-chasing type of lawyer who preys on workers and keeps for himself the greater part of the damages that he may succeed in collecting. As it is, industry is now almost without financial protection. Few liability companies will assume a silicosis risk at any but a prohibitive premium. It is a sad commentary that death from tuberculosis contracted in drilling is preferred by workers to rejection on medical grounds, or relegation to safer but less well-paid tasks by a humane employer after the X-rays have told their story of incipient silicosis.

In view of the enormous literature that has already appeared on silicosis it should be possible to frame a safety code which would be endorsed by both employers and labor. The South African gold mines have shown what can be done. In this country we have, among others, the investigations of the Public Health Service, the Bureau of Mines, the Harvard School of Public Health, the Saranac Laboratories. The good-will of the employers has been revealed by the investigations of the American Standards Committee and the Air Hygiene Foundation of America. Indeed, Mr. Alfred C. Hoyt was able to say at Washington on behalf of the Foundation that, so far as the design and fabrication of mechanical appliances are concerned, the dust hazard "is already on the way out." This being so, there is no reason why the installation of dust-removing or dust-preventing apparatus should not be made compulsory, as even the admittedly bad bill now before the State Legislature provides. If, in addition, State inspectors periodically make dust counts and surveyed industrial plants and excavations where dust would ordinarily be generated in dangerous amounts, there can be little doubt that silicosis would in a very few years be a rare occupational disease.

As a matter of practical legislation New York is primarily concerned with it these few years. Under a New York law which compels an employer to contribute heavily to special disability funds maintained by the Department of Taxation and Finance, whenever a worker is killed and leaves no dependents, many hundred thousand dollars have accumulated. The Industrial Commissioner himself proposed that out of these several funds $75,000 be appropriated annually for a study of silicosis—a proposal removed by the Assembly from the pending bill. This suggests that disabled workers who can prove that they contracted tuberculosis in a silicotic industry may well be cared for out of this accumulation during the brief transition period required to install preventive machinery, in accordance with a mandatory law.