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ON OUR COVER—After several decades of world leadership, the American maritime industry now suffers from government neglect and fierce competition in the global market against heavily-subsidized overseas carriers.

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Unionists Tell of Asbestos Dangers, Seek Improved Compensation Program

A congressional panel studying the nation's workers' compensation programs was told that only 30,000 of the estimated half-million American workers disabled each year by asbestos and other toxic substances actually receive compensation.

Sheldon Samuels, director of health, safety and environment for the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, said the record of compensation in the U.S. is nearly the worst among the industrialized nations.

Samuels testified before the House Subcommittee on Labor Standards. The panel is examining specific industrial health dangers, such as cotton dust-caused and asbestos-caused diseases, and is considering a national workers' compensation law to guarantee compensation to the victims.

The subcommittee's latest round of hearings focused on the dangers of asbestos. Testimony by a number of government health, scientific and labor witnesses sketched a bleak picture for victims of exposure to the substance.

Labor witnesses also focused on what they saw as an inadequate system of compensation for the victims and on what they viewed as the asbestos industry's record of covering up and minimizing the dangers.

Allen B. Coats, general representative for the AFL-CIO Metal Trades Department, charged the U.S. asbestos industry "knowingly caused great suffering and death" among its workers by withholding the facts about asbestos health risks.

"We feel some employers are guilty as hell," Coats declared.

The Department of Health, Education,

and Welfare has said an estimated 8 million to 11 million Americans face potentially serious health problems because of exposure to asbestos since the beginning of World War II.

As many as half of all persons occupationally exposed to the substance might develop lung cancer, mesothelioma, asbestosis or gastro intestinal cancer, according to HEW Secretary Joseph Califano. Many persons already have died from exposure, he said.

Congressional hearings last year revealed that the U.S. asbestos industry has known for decades that the substance could cause grave health problems, but internal corporate documents indicated the industry intentionally withheld the information from its workers and the public.

Coats argued that an adequate compensation program must be worked out to aid the victims and their families, and said the financial burden for such a program should fall on the asbestos industry employers.

Taxpayers must not be made—or even allowed—to pay the major cost of compensation except where the U.S. government was the employer," Coats said. "Any employer who made millions by literally walking over the dead bodies of his employees cannot be made to pay enough."

Samuels, speaking for the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department, said it makes "profound sense" to universalize an exclusive state compensation funds concept.

Such funds are operated directly by individual states and exclude private insurance carrier involvement. Samuels

said a six-year study of compensation funds showed that where private insurance companies were involved, only 64 cents of every premium dollar ended up in the hands of disabled workers. Exclusive state funds, meanwhile, paid 95 cents of every dollar to the workers.

The involvement of private insurance companies in the workers' compensation process has done "grave and irreparable harm" to millions of occupational disease victims, Samuels said.

"We urge that this committee . . . think the unthinkable and face up to the need for adopting the exclusive state fund concept for the entire country," he said.

Dr. David P. Rall, director of the government's National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, repeated earlier warnings that symptoms of asbestos-related diseases may not appear for 20 to 40 years following exposure to the substance.

Rall warned that a cigarette smoker who has been exposed to asbestos is 50 to 90 times more likely to incur lung cancer than a non-smoker who has not been exposed, and is 10 to 30 times as likely to develop lung cancer as a non-smoker who has been exposed.

No matter when the exposure occurred, Rall said, a worker who quits smoking even years later will reduce his or her chances of suffering lung cancer.

Dr. Phillip L. Polakoff, who is conducting an asbestos screening program in the San Francisco area, urged that the government increase its screening and education activities to locate and aid potential asbestos victims, and said a compensation system should be incorporated in a national health care plan.

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