

A school against asbestos

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They look like Martians out of a Buck Rogers comic strip.

Instead of ray guns they wield scrapers, shovels and high-pressure hoses, wear white paper suits and respirators, and work surrounded by sophisticated vacuum cleaners, klieg lights and 20 x 14-inch signs warning:

"CAUTION - ASBESTOS DUST HAZARD. AVOID BREATHING DUST. WEAR REQUIRED PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT. DO NOT REMAIN IN AREA UNLESS YOUR WORK REQUIRES IT...."

They are members of the Laborers International union who are going to school to learn the safest way to dismantle and dispose of one of the deadliest killers of our time - asbestos.

The US government estimates that since World War II more than 11 million Americans have been exposed to asbestos. And an estimated one-half of that number may die of lung cancer or other diseases due to their exposure.

There is a nationwide attempt to riddle buildings of the most hazardous materials containing asbestos.

Invariably members of the Laborers International union are called upon to be the soldiers in this cleanup war. That is why Director James Merloni Jr. of the New England Laborers Academy in Hopkinton set up the training program.

Merloni wants New England laborers who have to do this work to do it under the safest possible conditions, while limiting the public's exposure to asbestos dust - a substance pinpointed by doctors as a cause of lung cancer.

The trained cleanup teams, whose members even wear paper shoes, will soon be seen throughout New England as towns and municipalities began ridding their public buildings - particularly schools - of asbestos construction material used more than a decade ago. The work in schools has been given top priority.

Although the official war against asbestos has only been under way for 10 years the number of victims and lawsuits is increasing. In Connecticut, 300 suits seek more than \$1 million in damages from workers at the Electric Boat plant in Groton. Firms supplying the asbestos material are the defendants in the suits.

Asbestos has been used by man for centuries. The Greeks had a word for it - "asbesta," meaning the unquenchable, since when used as a wick in a lamp, the asbestos didn't burn.

Jim Stump of the Seagull Corp. of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., has another word for it - "killer." Seagull has pioneered the difficult asbestos removal problem.

Stump lectures and trains members of the Laborers union in New England on the safest means of dismantling asbestos material in buildings. He is assisted by John DeLeo, a regular instructor at the Laborer's Academy.

"Everyone has been exposed to some degree to asbestos dust - particularly in this area, where there has been so much boat building," Stump says.

"But our object is to cul down on the hazard for those men who, to protect the general population, have to remove the asbestos from public buildings. That is what we are here for," he adds.

He admits one of the toughest problems is to convince the workers of the danger - an incipient danger since the effects of asbestos poisoning may not show up for 10 years to 20 years.

"It is difficult to convince older workers of the danger. And it is difficult to also



Laborers International union classes are held under simulated asbestos-removal conditions. The "asbestos" is rock wool. CLOSE PHOTO BY TED DULLY

convince them that smoking increases the danger of infection from asbestos dust," Stump says.

But after reading all the government publications and warnings by the US government and seeing first hand some of the effects of asbestos poisoning on workers, it didn't take Merloni at the Laborers Academy long to be convinced.

Consequently all the Laborers union locals in New England will be sending workers to the 2½-day course. Except for the absence of asbestos - rock wool is used instead - the trainees tackle the project just as they would a real asbestos dismantling project.

Last week Local 560 of Waltham was participating. To two members, such educational projects are no novelty. Steve Goodspeed attends Wentworth Institute nights while working as a laborer in the daytime. And Joseph Favone is a graduate of Framingham State.

To make sure that workers don't carry

home any of the asbestos dust and infect their families, every worker trained to work in asbestos removal wears a paper suit and a mask. When work is finished, the worker goes to a shower, where the paper suits are carefully wrapped and placed in a bag for disposal. Next comes a shampoo and shower.

"It isn't the asbestos particles you can see that are the most dangerous," Stump warns the worker-student. "It is the fine particles that can only be seen under a microscope that are the real killers."

And it is during dismantling projects that the fibers break down.

Merloni first introduced the training program when it was discovered one New England contract intended ridding a high school of asbestos material without any of the safeguards needed to protect the workers, the community or the schoolchildren. When the contractor was apprised of the dangers involved, he enrolled his workers in the first course at the Academy.

PLAINTIFF'S EXHIBIT

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