

Mining

PLAINTIFF'S
EXHIBIT

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Mines of misinformation

AFRICAN WORKERS employed by the British company Turner & Newall at their asbestos mines in Zimbabwe are given inadequate safety protection against the killer dust that can cause incurable asbestosis and cancer. Furthermore, some miners are not even aware that they are at risk. These are among the claims made by employees interviewed at one of the biggest Turner & Newall asbestos mines in Zimbabwe.

The workers also complained about low wages, said to be below the minimum figure estimated to be the Poverty Datum Line for workers in the former British colony. And they criticised living conditions at the mine which relies mainly on migrant workers from the neighbouring countries of Mozambique and Malawi.

The allegations about the health risks to workers at the Turner & Newall mines come at a time when the dangers from asbestos are again coming under increasing scrutiny in Europe and the United States.

The EEC governments agreed on 9 June to introduce legislation within three years to ensure that workers exposed to asbestos are made aware of the hazards. Britain already requires employers to pass on that information. Last year the Government's Advisory Committee on Asbestos recommended that the limit for exposure to the type of asbestos fibre mined in Zimbabwe should be halved by December 1980.

The allegations about wages also come at a time when the issue of starvation wages paid by certain British companies to African workers in South Africa has become an issue once more. Turner & Newall are one of the 33 companies identified as paying some African workers less than subsistence level. The company does not mine asbestos in South Africa.

Turner & Newall have three asbestos mines at Shabani and Mashaba in the south of Zimbabwe. These produce chrysotile asbestos, less hazardous than the deadly blue variety but still dangerous. Several hundred Africans are em-

ployed at the mines.

Despite sanctions, these turned into virtual gold-mines for the Manchester-based company. In January the company told shareholders that since November 1965 these mines had earned profits totalling £85 million before tax. Largely as a result of this the British company said their net assets in Zimbabwe were now worth £92 million - against £6 million at the time of UDI. From then until the recent political settlement the mines were run by the local management with no control from Britain.

Workers interviewed recently at the giant Shabani mine said they were not aware that the fibres carried in asbestos dust could damage their health and possibly kill them. "No one has ever told us that," said a miner who has worked at Shabani for four years. Although working underground, he claimed that neither he nor his colleagues were provided with the usual protective respirators. He had noticed, however, that European supervisors and engineers wore such masks underground. But, he said, "If you said anything they would get the police".

T&N's managing director Wilfred Newton vehemently denied that workers were not provided with respirators. "That's nonsense," he said. "The safety regulations in force follow good mining practice and comply with international standards." Mr Newton, who has not visited the mines, said respirators were provided "where necessary and appropriate". He said he was "surprised" over the claim by miners that they were not aware of the health hazards.

The deadliness of exposure to asbestos fibres has been known since the 'forties. It can lead to a variety of cancers. Between 1968 and 1977 asbestosis was given as the cause of over 1200 deaths in Britain. The figure rose from 80 in 1968 to 183 in 1977.

Exposure for even a short period to asbestos fibres can prove fatal, for there is no safe level. In March a widow was awarded £27,500 damages in the High Court for the death of her husband from asbestosis. He had worked at a firm using the deadly material for only 18 months some 20 years before his death. Two other workers have received £71,000 and £57,500 in damages actions this year. Some 1,000 law suits are currently pending in California alone against



SHABANI: town in the shadow of a tailings heap

asbestos users by former employees. Turner & Newall are among those companies facing litigation concerning asbestos-linked diseases in the US.

At Shabani many employees and their families have been working and living in this hazardous environment for years. They live in company-provided housing around the mine. In February, 40 families living in the shadow of a closed-down asbestos mine in Arizona were moved out and the area proclaimed contaminated by the state government. Families were told that merely living close to two giant tips of asbestos tailings had increased their risk of contracting cancer by at least 10 times.

The African homes at Shabani are dominated by grey hills of asbestos tailings from the mine. "Many people complain about difficulties in breathing and pains in the chest," said a miner. He shrugged his shoulders when asked what they did about it. "If you cannot work you have to leave, and if you are sick then you don't get paid," he claimed. There is a hospital at the mine and workers are X-rayed.

Most of the houses at the Shabani mine have two rooms and a kitchen, without running water or lavatories. Each section instead has a latrine block and a water pipe. Most families have a house to themselves but bachelor workers have to share accommodation.

Wages for underground workers were said to start at just over £1 a day for an eight-hour shift. Surface workers are paid around 80p a day and average monthly wages were estimated by the miners at from £30 to £47. They receive fringe benefits like free housing and medical care but deductions are made for water and also to cover gloves, glasses, overalls and boots.

Even allowing for the fringe benefits, it would seem that T&N miners receive below the Poverty Datum Line of £67.50 estimated nine months ago by the University of Zimbabwe. There are no unions at the mine. "If you start talking about that you are sacked," explained one miner.

It was not possible to obtain any information about the conditions and wages of the Africans employed at Shabani or the other mines from Turner & Newall in Zimbabwe. The reason given was the still-existing post-UDI security regulations. Company secretary Peter Hodder told *Private Eye*: "There is nothing I can say about this". Asked how security designed to protect sanctions-busters could cover information about wages and conditions, he replied: "It is security over information on mining".

However, Mr Hodder added reassuringly: "We have some very good athletes here".

Two years ago, the then Chairman of Turner & Newall, Mr Patrick Griffiths, told shareholders and the Department of Trade, with regard to its South African operations: "Main board directors visit all overseas companies and keep in close touch with the local boards on matters relating to conditions of employment". Last month the current T&N chairman, Stephen Gibbs, visited the mine at Shabani.



WARNING: Protection from motorists, but nothing against the dangers of asbestos