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Death

WORKERS who Breathe DEATH



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A CABINET MINISTER stated the other day that there are ten million workers in this country engaged in unhealthy and dangerous occupations, and of this number three millions are constantly exposed to great danger.

To the very worst trades is now to be added another—the asbestos worker.

It is a newcomer because only during the last two years has any attempt been made to show the link between the causes and number of deaths of asbestos workers and their occupation.

During that period twelve deaths out of some 2,000 workers have been definitely ascribed by the investigators to a lung complaint for which they have coined the name "asbestosis."

That figure takes account only of those cases where inquests and post-mortems have taken place or other attempts at establishing the presence of the disease.

Will be worse

It does not include the numerous other deaths which have taken place amongst this class of worker and have been ascribed to ailments like bronchitis and pneumonia.

Nor, of course, can it give any idea of the numbers who have died, slowly strangled by this fell disease, before the authorities woke up to the fact that here was something which needed investigation.

The Home Office has just issued an official report describing the nature of this disease, and suggesting some method which asbestos companies should adopt to protect their work-people.

It ends on the bleak prophecy that there will be a rise to a peak in the death and disablement statistics, owing to the damage already done to the workers.

As some measure of cold comfort, it adds that if the safeguards suggested are adopted there should be a fall after the peak is passed.

To what height this peak is likely to rise, or when it is to take place—this year, next year, or ten years hence—the report is silent.

This new disease, which menaces the lives of thousands of workers, and which has already killed who knows how many, is a disease caused by dust—the asbestos dust given off by the material whilst it is being handled or worked.

Asbestos is a fibrous mineral substance, which can be spun and woven or pressed and moulded.

Fatal dust

Its chief virtue commercially is that it is unaffected by heat or acids, and during the last forty years a relatively large industry has grown up round this material.

It is an industry, incidentally, which is amongst the most lucrative in the country, judging by the dividends paid by most of the 150 or so firms which constitute the trade.

At least one of these firms has a capital running into millions of pounds.

In every stage to which this material is subjected the deadly dust is given off—sometimes a little, as in some of the weaving processes; sometimes a lot, as in splitting the fibres and in "bagging" and "mattress"-making.

The only advantage which the less dusty processes have is that it takes longer finally to cripple and disable the worker.

The dust enters the lungs and lodges in the delicate air-cells. The accumulated dust gradually hardens, and thereafter the lung becomes useless.

After five years' work the disease



At the top is Sir Thomas Legge, Government medical adviser, the great authority on dust diseases. Below him is Sir Herbert Samuel. He introduced a Bill to cover occupational diseases—twenty years ago!

has got a hold. In an official investigation it was found that after this period and up to ten years' service 30 per cent. of the workers examined had the disease.

Beyond this period the figure rose to 80 per cent.

It must be remembered also that the disease is progressive, and the longer he is in the trade the less chance the worker has of recovery.

Once it has got a hold, or, in other words, after about five years' service, its effect can never be eradicated.

Even if he leaves the trade altogether, it must inevitably lessen the worker's chances of recovery against

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the attacks of any ailment like bronchitis and pneumonia.

What is being done to combat this terrible menace?

On the employers' side some of the more enlightened have carried out such safety measures as have been suggested.

Nevertheless, according to H.M. Inspector of Factories, there are numerous places where antiquated machinery and hand-processes are used, all of which raise clouds of asbestos dust and flakes.

Many of the factories, too, are hopelessly unsuited for the work, being ill-ventilated and badly lighted.

There is no excuse for this. In the present state of engineering knowledge it is not impossible to provide perfect dust and fume removing apparatus.

Now they know—

It is true that such apparatus is initially expensive, but if it can be installed in other industries, such as the explosives and certain of the chemical industries, why not in the asbestos factories?

If boards of directors see only cost involved, steps should be taken to compel them to introduce adequate safety measures, now that this terrible and insidious menace in their trade is shown to exist.

Many firms have introduced cheap palliatives, such as providing gas-masks for workers in the more dusty processes.

The security these provide is worse than useless.

There has yet to be designed a mask which will stop particles one-fifty-thousandth of an inch in size, which is the order of minuteness of asbestos dust.

In one factory brought to our notice the dust-removing apparatus was so inadequate that the asbestos-dust blowing through the doors and windows covered the ground for yards around.

A neighbouring allotment-holder had to turn over his ground to bury the dust.

At another there have been several deaths among workers recently through lung complaints.

This fact brings us to what is perhaps the most shameful aspect of the whole affair.

There is no provision under the Workmen's Compensation Act for those who die or are disabled by this deadly dust.

Compel them

It is not listed as an occupational disease, and any provision for the workman or his family is left to the charity and good intentions of his employer.

A Bill to remedy this state of affairs has been before the House for two years; it has been wrangled over incessantly, and referred again and again to committees.

There is the strongest analogy between the conditions of the asbestos worker to-day and the lead-glaze worker of fifty years ago.

We do not want to see a repetition of the wordy Parliamentary battles and the belated protection and justice given to those workers in this latter day.

In view of the facts given above and confirmed by the Home Office investigation, surely the Government cannot delay longer in introducing legislation to compel factory-owners to provide adequate safeguards.

Let it introduce an Act to provide fair and just compensation for the dependents of those who have died and those whose health has been broken through this deadly peril of their daily work.