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Unions Planning New Challenge To U.S. Asbestos Regulations

By Jane E. Brody
Labor union officials yesterday indicated that they were planning a new challenge to Federal asbestos regulations on the ground that the rules failed to protect the health of asbestos workers and their families. The officials were reacting to a new study described yesterday in The New York Times showing that many of the workers have X-ray evidence of lung abnormalities, household contacts of asbestos workers could eventually develop asbestos-caused lung abnormalities and cancer as a result of their incidental exposure to asbestos fibers carried home on the workers' clothing.

The union officials were distressed by new data from England that suggested that the basis of current Federal regulations was invalid and that levels of asbestos to which workers were now exposed may cause cancer and lung disease years later.

In their anticipated challenge, the unionists are expected to insist—as they did once before—that manufacturing processes be designed so that workers will not inhale any asbestos fibers and that the employer provide special clothing, shower and change and laundering facilities so that workers do not bring the mineral fibers home to their families.

'A Different Dimension'

"We will be fighting from a different dimension," said Anthony Mazzocchi, legislative director of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union. "We are looking at a whole generalization of our children. It's not a thing to destroy a worker, another to destroy his family." According to current regulations, which were promulgated in response to similar labor demands three years ago, workers are not supposed to breathe air containing more than five long fibers of asbestos per cubic centimeter. That can add up to the inhalation of billions of asbestos fibers of all sizes each workday. Only when the asbestos levels at work exceed five fibers must the employer provide facilities for changing clothes.

However, a study by Dr. William Nicholson of Mount Sinai Medical Center here showed that the homes of asbestos workers are filled with the white fibers.

In 1972, the Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration ruled that the asbestos level in the work environment should be lowered to two fibers per cubic centimeter of air, but the effective date of this ruling was delayed until the end of 1976.

The two-fiber standard was based primarily on one study of 290 men at a British asbestos

factory. The study indicated that at approximately twice that level, only a few per cent of the workers exposed for 10 years or longer develop asbestos-caused lung disease. The workers at this factory have been re-examined by another physician, who found that from 40 to 70 per cent of the workers have X-ray evidence of lung abnormalities.

In addition, deaths among the original 290 men studied are being analyzed. According to preliminary information provided by Dr. Hilton Lewinsohn, medical director at the British factory, out of a total of 29 deaths thus far, seven were caused by lung cancer and three by mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest or abdomen. Both of these cancers are found with particular frequency among American asbestos workers exposed to considerably higher fiber levels.

"I don't see how we can tolerate a number for a fiber limit when we don't know what level causes cancer," Mr. Mazzocchi said in an interview yesterday. Sheldon Samuels of the Industrial Union Department of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, and representatives of several building trade and asbestos workers unions echoed Mr. Mazzocchi's sentiments.

In response to a labor union challenge and court ruling last year, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is preparing amendments to the asbestos standard which, an agency representative said, should be the subject of public hearings next year.