

Advocate Mines-Baie Verte

Profile of a multi-national at home and abroad



The sign says, "Danger". But the absentee owners of the Amatex plant in Agua Prieta do nothing to curb the flow of asbestos fibres that cling to the fences, the streets and the people of this northern Mexican town.

Asbestos, the people it kills and the multi-national corporations that ignore their responsibility are the topic of this feature written by Sandy Martland of St. John's, Newfoundland. The photographs and graphics (except for the Johns-Manville advertisement) are taken from NACLA's (North American Committee on Latin America) special publication "Dying for Work".

The health hazards posed by asbestos have been recognized since the days of the Greeks and Romans. Slaves who mined the precious mineral in those ancient times were provided with face masks as protection. In North America, insurance companies were refusing to hold policies for asbestos workers as early as 1918.

Yet in the town of Baie Verte, located on Newfoundland's northeast coast, it was only five years ago that the asbestos miners ascertained that their lives were being endangered by their work. And it was only this year that the miners' union, local 7713 of the United Steelworkers of America, demanded and won their rights for basic protection from the dust.

Martin Saunders, one of 510 unionized employees at Advocate Mines and president of the union local, recalls reading a magazine article several years ago about the hazards of asbestos. He asked managers of Advocate about the credibility of the article and was assured there were no health problems associated with asbestos mining. Today, Saunders is one of 50 men at Advocate whose lungs show scars which are an indication of the early stages of asbestosis.

Dr. Irving Selikoff, a New York specialist in industrial lung diseases, made the connection between asbestos and mesothelioma, a rare and inoperable cancer of the chest or abdominal membrane, as well as other cancers in the 1960s.

The Workmen's Compensation Board in Ontario has since accepted asbestos as a cause of some cancers, including gastro-intestinal cancers, but only after 20 years from the first exposure. This period is deemed to be the latency term for asbestos-related cancers.

It was Dr. Selikoff who tested the miners in Baie Verte and determined that 10 per cent of them had lung abnormalities—and Advocate has only been in operation for 15 years.

Outside of those 50 men, there are several former workers at Advocate who are disabled by chest conditions. However, it has not been proven conclusively that their problems are the direct result of the asbestos.

Gus Lewis, 58, worked at the mines for 13 years before he was forced to leave for health reasons. "They used to tell us that it wasn't going to hurt us . . . that it wasn't dangerous. So who'd wear masks? I guess it was years before I figured I was getting short breasted," he stated. Now, he is supporting his family of five children on Canada Pension and a war veterans' pension; he is suffering from cancer as well as a bad chest condition.

His brother-in-law, Tom Tobin, also has a bad chest and has to use a special inhaler because, as Lewis says, "He chokes every now and then." A father of three, the former Advocate worker receives only \$285 a month in pension benefits.

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