

ASBESTOS – STILL A KILLER

Q) I have heard that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are planning a campaign on Asbestos in the autumn. Is this true?

A) Yes it is true. During October and November 2008 the HSE will be running a national campaign to target maintenance workers and others who are still at risk from exposure to asbestos. The campaign will be launched on 13 October and its primary aim will be to raise awareness amongst workers who carry out maintenance and other repair activities and highlight the fact that they are more at risk than they think from asbestos. The campaign also aims to encourage such workers to find out more about asbestos and the precautions they should be taking. They have decided to target this particular group of workers because an unacceptably high number die from asbestos related illnesses each year.

Q) But why a campaign on Asbestos? I didn't think it was still a problem.

A) Despite a ban on the importation, supply, and use of all asbestos throughout Britain it continues to be a risk to the health of employees. This is because asbestos was used extensively as a building material and it can be found in many public service buildings built or refurbished between 1950s and 2000 including: schools, universities, hospitals, libraries and many local government offices. Up to 1.5 million buildings contain asbestos as it was commonly used as

- a spray coating for fire protection and insulation on steel work, walls, and ceilings;
- insulation lagging on pipes, boilers, and ducts;
- insulating boards or loose packing in wall partitions, fire doors, and ceiling voids; and
- cement products such as sheeting for walls and roofs, ceiling tiles, cold water tanks, gutters, pipes, decorative plasters, and textured finishes.

In addition, the effects of breathing in asbestos dust and fibres can take between 15 and 60 years to surface. Workers who carry out maintenance and repair work are most at risk, but anyone who work on a building is at risk of disturbing asbestos and others who work in any area of exposure are also likely to be affected.

With up to 1000 maintenance workers dying each year from past exposure to Asbestos fibres, it is still very much a problem for UNISON members.

Q) What should employers' be doing to protect workers from exposure?

Asbestos must be properly managed to prevent workers dying from asbestos related diseases in the future. Under general health and safety legislation, employers must assess the risk of exposure to asbestos and then do all that is reasonably practicable to avoid these risks, thereby ensuring the health and safety of employees and non employees. More specific duties are set out in the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006, where employers or those responsible for the maintenance and repair of a building must take reasonable steps to accurately identify and locate materials likely to contain asbestos – by getting expert surveys of the workplace, consulting the original building plans, and contacting the architect, builders, or leaseholder; They must also:

- assume that any given material contains asbestos until it is proven otherwise – including any materials which cannot be accessed;
- keep an up-to-date written record or register of the location of these materials;
- act on any findings by drawing up a priority list on how and when the asbestos will be removed;
- tell workers where the asbestos is before they start work and consider labelling potential asbestos;
- assess the risk of exposure to asbestos dust and;
- prepare and implement a management plan to control these risks – which must also be kept in written form, regularly reviewed and updated.

In addition, asbestos in poor condition should be removed. Minor damage must be repaired and/or sealed by HSE licensed contractors. An asbestos containing material which is in good condition and which is unlikely to be damaged or disturbed can be left in place. However, its location must be logged, and checked regularly.

What can our UNISON branch do to take part in the campaign?

Branches should ensure that their employer have taken steps to protect all staff from exposure to asbestos and have consulted safety representatives' on the actions taken. UNISON safety representatives are legally entitled to be consulted on all the steps taken in dealing with asbestos; including asbestos risk assessments, control measures, the results of any measurements or surveys, and details on how any removal work is prioritised and actioned.

Safety representatives should ensure that

- A system is in place for identifying and locating materials likely to contain asbestos?
- Written records on the location of asbestos are up-to-date and accessible?
- The records are always referred to before any building or maintenance work is planned or carried out, however minor?
- A system is in place to make sure that all contractors are aware of the organisation's procedures on asbestos?
- The condition of any asbestos left in place regularly monitored?
- If asbestos is to be removed a plan is in place to deal with its safe removal?
- The risk of exposure to asbestos assessed and a written record kept?
- Safety representatives are consulted over asbestos risk assessments; results of any surveys carried out and control measures?
- Information, instruction and training is given to staff about asbestos risks and the precautions needed?
- Procedures are in place to inform employees who have been exposed to asbestos?

Further information on the HSE campaign can be found at hse.gov.uk/asbestos

UNISON is updating its guidance on managing asbestos in the workplace and this will be available as an Information Sheet in time for the start of the HSE Campaign.

For more information on UNISON's work on health and safety go to <http://www.unison.org.uk/safety/index.asp>