

Efforts of Local Workers' Unions to Address Asbestos Issues

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Abstract

In Yokosuka City, we have the local trade union council, a collective body of trade unions derived from the former General Council of Trade Unions of Japan (SOHYO). Organized within the All Japan Shipbuilding and Engineering Union, the All Japan Garrison Forces Labor Union, the Japan Teachers' Union and the All Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers' Union and others, the council makes efforts to deal with local issues. In 1988, pneumoconiosis (asbestosis) victims in Yokosuka filed a lawsuit against Sumitomo Heavy Industries Ltd., which was the first collective litigation case for workers' compensation led by trade unions.

As a regional movement, the local council and related groups took comprehensive measures against asbestos misuse, not only against the defendant company but also to pressure Yokosuka City Hall, the Labour Standards Inspection Office and courts, by appealing to the general public in the region. The scope of lawsuits has become extended as the All Japan Garrison Forces Labor Union filed another asbestos lawsuit against the U.S. Yokosuka Naval Base. The council believes it is necessary to raise public awareness of asbestos and its risks as a regional subject and to continue to help asbestos victims. Significantly, we, union members, have learned much about asbestos issues through these efforts.

In 1987, the city of Yokosuka had a program to eliminate asbestos from school buildings and other public facilities. At that time, we accepted the program without question; just another government order to be implemented. It became clear, however, that the government's program in those days did not deal with materials containing less than 5 percent asbestos. Based on this fact, the council conducted its own reviews in their workplaces, namely, all public facilities in Yokosuka City, and assessed the present situation of materials containing less than 5 percent asbestos, in parallel with the official review. Recently, some union members were exposed to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from abandoned condensers, revealing inadequate official management of dangerous materials.

We cannot help saying that it is not just a health issue for workers, or rather, a criminal act, because the above hazards were in public facilities. We believe that we, trade unions, bear the responsibility to investigate and reveal asbestos crime for what it is.