

Prevention of Asbestos Exposure of Construction Workers and Workers' Compensation

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Abstract

The General Federation of Construction workers' Unions (ZENKENSOREN) is a collective body of 53 prefectural bodies of construction workers' unions which organize individual construction workers at their residences. It is Japan's largest industrial union with 700,000 members.

Asbestos, once commended as miracle mineral was used in a large variety of construction materials. Not recognizing its risks, many workers were exposed to asbestos during their construction work, such as spraying or processing materials containing asbestos, and eventually died of asbestos-related diseases without knowing the real causes of their terrible deaths. The Union started to address the asbestos issues in the middle of 1980s. Taking the 72nd General Conference of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) adoption of Asbestos Convention and its following recommendation in 1986 as a good opportunity, the Union set up its Asbestos Committee in 1988. Since then, the Committee has endeavored to raise awareness of the union members, conducting health surveys, making requests for national and local governments' agencies to address the issue, and conducting research and surveys in cooperation with specialists. Based on these efforts, the Union has issued two brochures since 1988, producing a video titled "Silent Time-Bomb" in 2002. The efforts have led Japan to ban the use of asbestos in ten manufacturing products including five construction materials in principle, starting from October 2004. There are still some issues remaining, however. Asbestos is not totally eliminated from construction materials; it is still used as a mortar additive and mixed into some coating materials; measures to prevent release of airborne asbestos fibers in demolishing houses and buildings are insufficient; there are challenges such as raising public awareness of the relationship between diseases and asbestos, or fighting for compensation for workers' accidents. To improve the current situation, the Union is making efforts to achieve a total ban on asbestos and to prevent health hazards in cooperation with related trade unions, citizen's organizations and medical experts.