

Asbestos Issues that Highlight Labor Union's Social Responsibilities

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Abstract

On May 8, 1982, the daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that, in the space of five years, 39 shipyard workers at Yokosuka shipbuilding companies and the U.S. Navy's Yokosuka Base had died one after the other from asbestos-related lung cancer. At that time, we had in place a labor union for Sumitomo Heavy Industries shipyard workers (Uraga Branch) and an association of the retired workers. However, we did not know that asbestos had killed fellow members until we saw the article.

The report called on the All Japan Shipbuilding and Engineering Union (ZENZOSEN) to reflect on its efforts for workers' safety and health. The union, by assuming safety and health issues were the responsibilities of businesses, had failed to act, and realization of this spurred the ZENZOSEN headquarters and its Uraga Branch into action. The branch soon then set up task forces to conduct health checkups and support victims in cooperation with related organizations. It demanded that industry stop using asbestos. In addition, it supported both damage suits by victims and out-of-court settlements through labor-management negotiations.

The ZENZOSEN headquarters demanded that the then labor and transport ministries and the shipbuilding industries ban all asbestos use and also instructed its branches nationwide to eradicate asbestos from their workplaces. As a result, currently no shipyard where ZENZOSEN organizes workers uses asbestos.

Over the last several years, some branches won extra compensation schemes for asbestos-related diseases and pneumoconiosis after retirement. Those schemes are significant in that they give victims relief and clarify the industry's accountabilities.

Asked who is responsible for shipyard workers' asbestos-related sufferings, we have to respond that we at ZENZOSEN also are responsible. Of course, the companies that forced workers to engage in hazardous jobs and the government that allowed the use of asbestos over the years without even checking its safety should shoulder much of the blame. But we believe that we cannot fully fulfill our responsibilities toward current and past union members if we do not remember our past failings.