

## **Asbestos-Related Pneumoconiosis Lawsuits by Shipyard Workers in Yokosuka**

**Kazuzo Nomura**

*Lawyer, Kanagawa Sogo Law Office, Japan*

### **Abstract**

#### **The first asbestos-related pneumoconiosis lawsuit against Sumitomo Heavy Industries**

Eight former employees who for years had worked at Yokosuka's Sumitomo Heavy Industries shipyards filed a damages lawsuit against the company in Summer 1988. The plaintiffs claimed that they fell ill with pneumoconiosis and became susceptible to lung cancer and mesothelioma, after longtime exposure to dust containing asbestos and other hazardous chemicals. The company denied the allegation. The court hearings continued for eight years and eight months until a settlement was reached in Spring 1997. (After the settlement, one plaintiff died from cancer and one died from mesothelioma.)

After the settlement, the company and the labor union reached an agreement to give extra compensation to retired workers suffering from pneumoconiosis and other asbestos-related diseases. It was the first agreement to offer extra compensation to retired workers in the shipbuilding industry, leading other shipbuilding companies to follow suit.

#### **The filing of the second lawsuit**

In Summer 2003, the second lawsuit against Sumitomo Heavy Industries was filed with the Yokohama District Court, Yokosuka Branch. The case is still before the court.

The plaintiffs were 11 former employees suffering from pneumoconiosis and the bereaved families of 3 employees who died from mesothelioma. Claiming that these cases were not covered by the agreement, the company refused to compensate the victims. The plaintiffs are aiming to reach a new agreement that will provide relief to a wider range of former employees.