The Miracle Fiber Exposed as a Deadly Threat: Some Moments in the Battle to Have Asbestos Banned from Use in Australia

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The history of the mining, manufacture and use of asbestos in Australia is a history of shameful neglect at best and at worst horrendous promotion of profit over human life. All those in touch with asbestos are at risk of contracting one of the many diseases associated with it. While asbestos was used in Australia from early in the twentieth century its use escalated dramatically after the Second World War. A substance that could withstand extreme conditions without damage was irresistible to those who sought to profit from the unprecedented growth of post-war Australia. In a booming economy the miracle fiber was used extensively in the manufacture of many products and in industrial, commercial and domestic construction. Use of asbestos in Australia was extensive compared with other countries. The legacy of this is that asbestos still lurks in backyards, in sheds, in rubbish dumps, in schools and in hospitals. Everywhere there are buildings or products that pre-date the banning of asbestos in 2003. There are few living Australians who don’t know first-hand a person who has died from asbestos related disease. 642 people died of mesothelioma in 2010 (Sydney Morning Herald, 5 September 2012), and as the number of victims continues to rise it is predicted that mortality will not peak before 2020.

The asbestos industry in Australia was involved in mining, and manufacture of products which contained asbestos largely for the building industry but also in parts for cars and machinery. There were three mines; Wittenoom in West Australia (WA) produced blue asbestos (crocidolite) from 1943 to 1966; in the seventies there was a mine at Woodsreef, and another at Baryulgil in NSW that mined white asbestos (chrysotile). None of the mines were particularly profitable. Building materials containing asbestos were made by James Hardie Industries, Wunderlich (which was owned by CSR who had also owned the mine at Wittenoom) and Goliath Portland Cement Company in Railton. Hardie were by the far the largest of these companies and their influence on the events in Australia was hegemonic. Other companies that worked with asbestos were in the manufacturing sector and included either spraying asbestos as insulation or using it for friction parts for vehicles.
Conflicted Loyalties

The problem that the history of asbestos poses to all of us interested in social change is this. Some asbestos producers were in possession of the facts of asbestos disease before the end of the second world war and acted effectively to prevent this from becoming public knowledge. In the post war period research uncovered more and more information about more and more health hazards yet this information was largely held captive by the industry. Yet why was it that medical scientists who also knew that asbestos posed lethal dangers did not communicate this fact to the general public until the 1960s, and many participated in spreading disinformation to the end? Why was it that government authorities, also long in possession of the facts, failed to put an end to asbestos production and importation until 2003, despite thousands of deaths? And even when the dangers of asbestos became public knowledge in the 1960s, on the whole, people who were exposed to asbestos fibers continued working in unsafe conditions refusing to believe that they were in danger, often until the number of deaths in their locality and among coworkers and family became overwhelming? And how was it possible for even senior managers of asbestos companies to see members of their own family die of exposure to asbestos, and yet continue to deny the dangers of asbestos and expose others to the risk? Why did low-paid, exploited asbestos workers go on exposing themselves to asbestos long after the dangers of asbestos were public knowledge, even when other jobs were available?

Neither structuralist sociology nor naïve theories of economic self-interest provide an adequate explanation of these facts. But even more significantly, such theories cannot explain how it came about that asbestos mining, importation and use, which had gone on in Australia for a century, was eventually banned, and asbestos is now universally recognized as a lethal danger and its discovery in old buildings frequently the cause of panic.

What this story brings to light is that the behavior, loyalties and beliefs found in the world of work in a capitalist economy cannot be grasped solely in terms of economic categories or theories of social reproduction. In the order of Nature, so to speak, individuals occupying the same economic position are in competition with one another. Solidarity between workers and class consciousness arise in the face of exploitation, only thanks to projects launched by activists promoting a solidaristic ideal which mitigates the exploitation and creates class consciousness, mutual aid and the commitment of workers to the class project. Employees are neither blind and loyal servants of their firm, nor uniformly imbued with class hatred of their bosses, nor solely driven by individual, family or community concerns. The extent to which one or another loyalty