

SILICOSIS

Killing is not murder when done for profit.

The Commonwealth government expects 4,000 deaths this year from asbestos-related conditions, a figure to continue for some years.

www.asbestossafety.gov.au

Silicosis is likely to match that total each year and to extend well beyond the era of when most of the sufferers from asbestos will have died.

Black lung is back.

Labourers clawed Sydney from its sandstone. Digging for sewers, the underground rail and high rises - even suburban blocks - generated clouds of silica. Silicosis sometimes took years to show up so that doctors misreported the condition as tuberculosis. The damage is not caused by dust clogging the lungs. Rather, in trying to expel the particles, the air sacs are scarred, which stops the lungs from stretching as much as they need to do to take in enough breathe. Victims smother from the inside.

One Sydney contractor acknowledged in 1908 that within two years, strapping navies “pine away to almost nothing”. Because the Public Works Department (PWD) in New South Wales put cost-saving above saving lives, contractors won jobs by driving their labourers to work longer hours in the dust. A Sydney contractor accepted that rock-chopping laid waste to his labourers:

I think that the sewer miners are greatly to be pitied in the work they have to do. If the men do not complain, I shut my eyes to the facts, because, in competition, you cannot afford to incur any greater expense than is necessary.¹

Another employer remarked: “A contractor does not take a job to slaughter men; but at the same time he has to make a living.”² The difficulties that labourers faced in making their living explained why some accepted the wages of death. With labourers rarely paid for a full week, their annual earnings were about a fifth below those for a man in consistent work. By contrast, rock-chopping on PWD jobs guaranteed a full week’s pay every week of the year – for as short a time as a navy survived. More rock-choppers would have worked on building sites had they lived long enough.

The rock-choppers formed unions to fight for their lives, breaking away from the United Labourers’ Protective Society in 1908. In October, they took advantage of a shortage of labour to stop work in support of a six-hour day. In defiance of the Industrial Disputes Act, which made strikes illegal, four leaders went to prison, thereby strengthening the resolve of the members and attracting support from other unions. The Industrial Court, the Press and the Premier spurred the contractors on to lock out their workforce. The *Sydney Morning*

¹ Quoted Peter Sheldon, “Job Control for Workers’ Health: the 1908 Sydney Rockchoppers’ strike”, *Labour History*, 55, November 1988, p. 43, see below for link [////////////////??????????](#).

² Quoted Sheldon, p. 41.

Herald saw that the workers were “face to face with the state.” The men refused to return until all their demands had been met and their leaders released. They won that round.³ The battle continued for reduced exposure. Twenty years later, the United Labourers’ Protective Society withdrew its claim for a 35-hour week for trench-diggers in exchange for higher wages and the supply of masks and goggles by the employers. In 1939, the ABLF’s Federal Award claimed a 15-minute break every two hours for rockchoppers.⁴

A ration of sand

New South Wales introduced the Workers Compensation (Dust Diseases) Act in 1942. Within five years, 87 claims had been accepted, including 19 for deaths. Six widows got payments after post-mortems on their husbands who had not claimed. By early 1973, compensation had been paid to 496 workers, of whom 407 had died.⁵ Among those victims were men who had built the Snowy Mountains hydro where bonuses for besting time-schedules sent workers back into dynamited tunnels to breathe in 4,000 parts per cubic centremeter of air; the International Labour Organisation set the safe minimum at 200.⁶

“Boom brings fatal dust pollution”, headlined Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* in 1972.⁷ The unions used the public’s inconvenience to win protection for on-site workers. A revival of city building had led to a new epidemic of silicosis. At the Hotel Metropole site early in 1971, labourers were excavating to a depth of nearly four metres for 48-60 hours a week in double shifts. Under one skyscraper in the Sydney CBD, the particle level was up to 6,000, instead of 200, while that in the King’s Cross tunnel was 90 times the ILO standard.⁸ The Minister announced in August 1972 that “control of dust arising from excavation work generally had been under consideration for some time now.”⁹ In truth, it had been “under consideration” for seventy years. Instead of reform, the government suggested that any bad case should be reported to the inspectors.

When the government set up a Standing Technical Committee on Dust Control, the AWU delegate never came. After continuing poor attendance, the meetings became quarterly. At the third meeting, the ABLF representative reported that his members had embarked on a six-month campaign to eliminate the killer. From 1 May 1973, unsafe jobs were to be stopped for 24 hours.¹⁰ This action forced amendments to workplace laws so that after 1 December 1973

³ Sheldon, pp. 50-54.

⁴ *Newcastle Construction*, 15 May 1930, p. 7; NSW ABLF Minutes, 25 November 1939, Mitchell Library (MLK) 02475.

⁵ *NSW Builder’s Laborer*, August 1959, pp. 5-9; *Nation Review*, 29 June 1973, p. 1130; Penelope Read, *Workers’ Compensation (Silicosis) Committee, Preliminary Inventory*, The Archives Authority of New South Wales, Sydney, 1962; Milton Boulter, *Workers’ Compensation Practice in New South Wales*, Law Book co., Sydney, 1966, pp. 60-65; C. P. Mills, *Workers’ compensation (New South Wales)*, Butterworths, Sydney, 1969, pp. 178-82.

⁶ Brad Collis, *Snowy: the making of modern Australia*, Tabletop Press, Palmerston (ACT), 2000, p. 163.

⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 5 October 1972, p. 5d-f.

⁸ Industrial Hygiene Branch, Department of Health, to Department of Labour and Industry, 8 February and 30 November 1971, MLK 04268.

⁹ F. M. Hewitt to NSW Trades & Labor Council, 1 August 1972, and H. Cook to T&LC, 1 September 1972, MLK 04266.

¹⁰ *NSW Builder’s Laborer*, April 1973, p. 23, June 1973, pp. 9 and 47; *Nation Review*, 22 June 1973, p. 1104, letter from Joe Owens, 6 July 1973, p. 1163.

contractors were not allowed to let dust particles escape, though the threat has returned.¹¹

A Scientific Officer at the Health Commission, Dr Eva Francis, reported in 1973 that it was “almost an academic exercise to take a dust test in Sydney sandstone.” She feared that “the numbers in this State with silicosis can only be expected to grow to epidemic proportions.” In one case, a man aged 44 years had operated a jackhammer for seven years, mainly in pier holes. During the previous two years, he had complained of breathlessness at any exertion; his lung-functions were down to 50 per cent of normal. The Compensation Board awarded him a 100 per cent pension. Dr Francis identified three behaviours compounding the menace in the city excavations:

Firstly, there is the problem of a largely non-English speaking work-force making communication difficult.

Secondly, there is the migratory, gypsy-like habits of the sub-contractors as compared to the permanency of say the moulders in the foundries of whom ‘dust on the lungs’ is almost a myth.

And thirdly, it is an open-air situation in contrast to the usual factory atmosphere. The men feel that they are safe in the fresh air.

The dust could be eliminated with a \$10 water spray, a device developed by workers at the Water Supply and Sewerage Board and made available free to all employers. Nonetheless, water sprays were not fitted on the excavations for the Eastern suburbs railways until 1971. Dr Francis pointed out

The solution to the jack-pick problem is a simple, inexpensive coil attachment and a water flow. The Union appears to be the only hope for these men. Only in the last 3 months, since they have insisted upon it, has water been available.

Echoing the pleas of the rockchoppers from 70 years before, she concluded:

the comment can only be that these men are the new convict labour of a “progressing” Australia. What price progress? This land of sunshine, this land of plenty, cannot afford a trickle of water to go with the sandstone rations.¹²

Silicosis was concentrated in segments of Sydney and contained with simple equipment.

By contrast, employers were murdering for profit with another dust. This one had been killing workers throughout the century and across the planet.

[The above is from Humphrey McQueen, *Framework of Flesh Builders Labourers battle for health and safety* (Port Adelaide: Ginninderra Press, 2009), pp. 132-4 full text on www.surplusvalue.au]

4000 Australians a year for profit? And should they ever do so, will the Registered Organisations Commission let them off with a 7-year ban on holding office? That’s all the James Hardie directors copped.

JoeHillandTheNeverSayDieCollective@JoeHillorganiser

¹¹ *National Safety (NS)* September 2005, pp. 24-26.

¹² Typescript of lecture at Lidcombe Health Centre, 27 July 1973, pp. 23-24, MLK 04266.