

Ep 17 – Asbestos A Lethal Legacy

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:11] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that brings you stories from BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Today we take a look at a rather grim but important story, and that's the ongoing toll taken by the deadly cancer mesothelioma, caused by exposure to the carcinogenic fibres of asbestos. Because it often takes decades for mesothelioma to develop, it is only in recent years that the full impact of this terrible industrial disease has become apparent. In 2009, for the first time, WorkSafe B.C. reported more work related death claims from industrial disease than from workers dying on the job. The major reason for that was long ago exposure to asbestos. The alarming death rate continues today despite the fact that the use of asbestos now is practically non-existent. The B.C. labour movement has a long history of fighting to protect the health and safety of workers. Those struggles have often led to safeguards for the population as a whole, and asbestos is a good example. Like the shameful story of the tobacco industry, which ignored and denied the health risks of smoking for decades, the corporate greed of the asbestos industry meant that many thousands of workers were exposed to the deadly substance, usually with little or no protection. Lee Loftus, a third generation member of the Insulators Union Local 118, and now retired as its business manager, has played a key role over the years in raising awareness and understanding of the risks of asbestos exposure.

Lee Loftus [00:02:09] Asbestos is the leading cause of death in the workplace today. It used to be all kinds of other things. In the last 15 years, it has been the key cause of workplace fatalities and it maintained those numbers for the last decade and a half, and it will continue to do that. Those people that were exposed in the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, the '80s and even into the '90s are the people that are getting sick today. They're the people that are getting mesothelioma and their linings of their lungs are thickening. They're having heart attacks. They're getting bronchogenic carcinoma, the upper portions of their lungs. Those are the people that are dying as a result of their work in yester-years. And that's going to continue because we still don't have it under control.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:02] Unions have been battling since the 1970s for strict regulations in the use of asbestos and decent compensation for those ill and dying from its deadly fibres. But before we talk more about this, there is some good news. This month, September of 2022, the BC labour Heritage Centre officially unveils a remarkable memorial for the victims of asbestos exposure. Entitled "Magic and Lethal," this imposing piece of public art by sculptor Douglas Taylor occupies a prominent place on the Vancouver waterfront, close to the Convention Centre, just up from the existing Workers Walk. It's the culmination of a long, arduous process that had to overcome cumbersome bureaucracy, financial hurdles and Covid 19 delays. But it is finished at last, and there is nothing like it in North America. As a board member of the Labour Heritage Centre, Lee Loftus has spearheaded the project from the beginning. As he relates in an interview with Patricia Wejr, the idea emerged during a meeting around the Centre's boardroom table. When someone suggested a plaque to commemorate asbestos victims, Lee thought a plaque was not enough.

Lee Loftus [00:04:21] And I just piped up and said, you know what, there is no known monument or place that people can go in North America, not Canada, in North America, to acknowledge the travesty that asbestos has brought to workers and the public. We should think about that. And that generated the conversation, much vigour around the conversation, to be very honest with you, and well embraced. And we started figuring out

how could we do this? And it was an exciting little adventure because it happened fairly fast. You know, the officers of the Labour Heritage Centre went out and sought some consultation within the industry, started talking to the people that we've been involved with in doing our labour recognition plaques, plaques around the province. And they came back, it looks like we can do this if we put together a bit of a package and we've already talked to Canada Place or the Convention Centre. They said they would give us a little piece down by the Line of Work. And I said, wow, that's a fabulous location because if you're standing at the Line of Work and at the front end of it and you look towards the North Shore and into the mountains, you see all the industrial settings, you see the old Cassiar Asbestos Piers, you see all of the shipyards where a lot of exposure happened. A lot of workers got sick as a result of that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:52] The stories of workers dying because of exposure to asbestos, through no fault of their own, are heartbreaking. After 35 years as a safety-conscious electrician at the Powell River pulp mill, Doug Ford had been looking forward to retirement. But in 2006, his growing shortness of breath was diagnosed as mesothelioma. 18 months later, a few days after his 70th birthday, he was dead. Leslie, his grieving widow and daughter, Tracy, did not want Doug's death to be forgotten. Working with the BC Building Trades, they established the Asbestos Research Education and Advocacy Fund, which funds research into Canada's number one occupational killer. Tracy Ford recalls how the disease caught up with her father.

Tracy Ford [00:06:46] They did take him to the hospital and they found he had fluid on his lung and they drained the fluid to relieve the pressure and they sent a sample off for testing. And it was the results of that test that confirmed that he actually was very ill and he had mesothelioma. Mesothelioma is a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. The lining of the lung, it fills with fluid. And as there's more pressure on the lung, you can't breathe and there's no cure for mesothelioma.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:23] The toll taken by industrial diseases like mesothelioma is captured by this evocative song, 'More Than a Paycheck'.

Music: 'More Than a Paycheck' performed by Solidarity Notes Labour Choir

[00:07:34] Well now workers lend an ear, 'cause it's important that you know. With every job there is the fear that disease will take its toll. If not disease, then injury may befall your lot. And if not injury, then stress is going to tie you up in knots. So we bring home more than a paycheck to our loved ones and family. We bring more than a paycheck to our loved ones and family.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:18] Dave Pritchett relates the tragic tale of his mother. Pritchett, the grandson of IWA co-founder Harold Pritchett, is a former executive member of Longshore Local 500.

Dave Pritchett [00:08:31] I was on the ship, probably the Koto Passian at the the asbestos dock called White Pass, where we were handling bags of asbestos. Real dirty job. Asbestos rained into the hatch on a sunny day like snow. No gloves, no masks, no coveralls. And I didn't know how dangerous that was and my mother died of mesothelioma and it could have been from me bringing that home on my Cowichan Indian sweater and touque which everybody -- that was sort of one of the standard fare you might say, working on the docks. A lot of people wore mackinaws and Cowichan sweaters. They were warm... but they picked up a lot of asbestos. And of course, my English mum, doing all the housework, she'd be shaking out my clothes when I come home from work, living on

Normandy Drive. And that that could have -- I mean she got bombed out of two houses in the Second World War in England, worked in Peek Freans. There was asbestos in a lot of the shipping industry on the BC Ferries. So you know, we were subject to that, but Longshore personnel were on the front line of handling that stuff in a pretty raw form.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:42] The bags of asbestos Dave Pritchett was loading came from the Cassiar asbestos mine in northern British Columbia. The Cassiar miners were aware that there were risks from mining asbestos. During the 1970s, they staged several wildcat strikes to protest safety conditions. CAIMAW union members at Arrow Transport refused to work on containers contaminated with asbestos from Cassiar.

Music: 'Sit Down' performed by Manhattan Chorus [00:10:09] Sit down, just keep your seat, sit down and rest your feet, sit down you've got 'em beat, sit down, sit down. When they tie the can to a union man, sit down, sit down. When they give him the sack, they'll take him back. Sit down, sit down. Sit down, just keep your seat, sit down and rest your feet, sit down you've got 'em beat, sit down, sit down. When they tie the can to a union man, sit down, sit down. When they give him the sack, they'll take him back. Sit down, sit down. Sit down, just keep your seat, sit down and rest your feet, sit down you've got 'em beat, sit down, sit down.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:51] Cominco was another worksite riddled with asbestos where workers took action. After several town hall meetings, the Steelworkers local in Trail identified nearly 100 asbestos victims who had worked in the smelter before 1980. One of them was Buddy Brace. After years at Cominco, he was diagnosed early with mesothelioma at the age of 50. He died three years later. His widow, Linda Brace, recounted the company's response to the death of her husband.

Linda Brace [00:11:28] I had got -- you know Gail Heslop, she came with me when we had to sign papers and everything at Cominco. And one of the papers that I had to sign, was saying that Cominco was not responsible for what had happened to him. And I looked at them and I said, you gotta be kidding me. I have to sign that paper saying that you guys didn't do this? I will not sign. They said, well, then we have to hold his last paycheque. I said you can have his last paycheque, I don't care. But I will not sign that piece of paper.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:59] This type of company reaction was not unusual. Governments were not much better. In 2002, the BC Liberal government cut off loss of earnings pensions for asbestos victims after they turned 65. This has not been changed under the NDP. Meanwhile, as we have seen, companies often brazen disregard for workplace risks and hazardous conditions usually left it up to workers to sound the alarm. Another notable example of that came in 1971 with a historic wildcat strike by asbestos construction workers on the Pacific Centre project in the heart of downtown Vancouver. In those days, the use of asbestos was commonplace in shipyards, oil refineries, industrial sites and construction. As an officer of the Insulators and Asbestos Workers Union Local 118, Lee Loftus' father, along with business manager Tony Ceraldi, were in the forefront of researching and highlighting the risks of asbestos exposure. That came to a head at the Pacific Centre building site. Lee Loftus.

Lee Loftus [00:13:12] The Pacific Centre, the TD tower was under construction in 1971 and my father was actually spraying asbestos on all the ceilings and all the walls. And all that asbestos overspray was falling down into the streets. It was laying on the cars. It was all over the sidewalks and they were doing nothing to contain it. And the workers, all of the workers, the plumbers and the pipefitters and the carpenters, the sheet metal workers, the

labourers were all made aware of what the hazards were. Then they went on strike because they asked them to clean it up. They asked them to contain it and it took a wildcat strike, a full day before the Workers Compensation Board come in and deemed it as a nuisance dust, not as a hazardous dust, because it still wasn't recognized as a known carcinogen.

Music: 'Sit Down' performed by Manhattan Chorus [00:14:15] When the speed-up comes, just twiddle your thumbs. Sit down, sit down. When you want them to know they'd better go slow, sit down, sit down. Sit down, just keep your seat. Sit down and rest your feet, sit down you've got 'em beat. Sit down, sit down. When the boss won't talk, don't take a walk. Sit down, sit down. When the boss sees that, he'll want a little chat. Sit down, sit down. Sit down, just keep your seat. Sit down and rest your feet, sit down you've got 'em beat. Sit down, sit down.

Lee Loftus [00:14:51] So it took a day of a strike of construction workers to stop the public exposure. It didn't stop the workers' exposure, but it did contain it to certain areas. So that was really, probably the first leading piece that the labour movement did in British Columbia around acknowledging asbestos was a hazard. It was a carcinogen. It was not good for workers and it was not good for public. So that was where everything started to move. It took another nine years before regulations in British Columbia were actually written to control some of the workplace environment and talk about dry-sweeping and moistening it and all the things that you would use to stop it from being airborne. So you know, it was an interesting time for me. I was a young kid, hadn't quite entered the industry yet.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:48] Lee remembers his father coming home covered in asbestos and being surrounded by it as a child. Yet that didn't stop him from working with asbestos himself, while still a teenager. In his working career, he saw it all.

Lee Loftus [00:16:04] Well, I started in the industry three years later. I was 17 years old then, and I found myself in an oil refinery in Fort St John, just out of Fort St John, Taylor, BC. And I was the first apprentice, first helper on the job and there was me and a couple of old guys that were up there and they were showing me the ropes and we were setting up this big expansion for this oil refinery. My job was, as we started to remove the insulation from vessels and piping, we were saving the asbestos that was on the tanks and on the vessels because you couldn't buy it anymore. Not knowing why you couldn't buy it, you just couldn't buy it anymore. My job was to take that off and peel it off, put it into 45-gallon drums so that we could later use it and reinstall it. And I would throw the big 45-gallon drums into a mixing box and throw water. And I'd use a hoe and mix it all up. And I was covered with asbestos and I knew enough to ask for a mask, a respirator, some PPE. And the old guys used to laugh at me. I mean, they says, you know, what are you talking about? I've been doing this for 30 years. This stuff won't hurt you. So, you know, it took a long time to change that culture within the industry. And from there I went into the commercial job sites and then I found myself working in the shipyards. In the shipyards, you know, in the late '70s and early '80s was like working on a job site that was 1950. You know, they were archaic in the rules and the regulations and asbestos was everywhere. Every ship, every dry dock, every pier. And it took us ten years to get them to recognize that before they started to actually put controls and measures in place. You've got to think about that. But I've spent my whole career working around regulations for asbestos and improving health and safety in the workplace. I helped write the regulations that are currently in place. I helped structure all the pieces. I have been a key player in that conversation, not just here in BC, but across Canada, if not North America. A lot of that

work was done here in BC. We were the first people out of the gate raising a lot of concerns.

Music: 'More Than a Paycheck' performed by Solidarity Notes Labour Choir

[00:18:30] We bring more than a paycheck to our loved ones and family. We bring more than a paycheck...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:19] It took years of lobbying until finally in 2018, Canada banned all uses of asbestos in the country. But as Lee Loftus points out, the move came far too late.

Lee Loftus [00:19:32] You know, asbestos is still in all industrial settings in British Columbia. We have an inventory, we know it's there. We're supposed to be told. Often those inventories aren't kept current. But if you're in a shipyard, an oil refinery, a chemical plant, a waste reduction plant, an incinerator location, you know that asbestos is there. The renovation industry in the residential community is even worse. You know, every house built prior to 1990 contained asbestos. As you drive around the Lower Mainland or Victoria or Prince George and you see those houses being torn down and razed to the ground. Often, more often than not, asbestos hasn't been removed prior to that. So those workers that are doing that demolition, the neighbours that are sitting in the back yard, are being exposed to asbestos and it will bring in negative health concerns in the future for them. So we're not finished with this yet. We're still working with regulations in British Columbia to talk about how we license contractors and controlled demolition permits. And the government seems to be on side, but it's been a long study with them for the last three years to try to get some way to do that. Municipalities are on side to do hazard assessments and prior to issuing demolition permits. We just haven't got the provincial government there yet. The Minister of Labour is onside. He's working with his other ministers to get it done and hopefully we'll get it done in the next 18 months or so. But those exposures today, we'll see death in 30 to 40 years. So we're going to see this in 2050. We're going to see this in 2060. I wouldn't be surprised to see this in 2080. If it goes to 2080, that's 100 years, a century to try to control this. And, you know, that's a travesty.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:21:53] A travesty, indeed. And without the efforts of Lee Loftus, Tony Ceraldi, Cathy Walker, Larry Stoffman and others who fought for stricter regulations, more public awareness and better compensation for those stricken by asbestosis and mesothelioma, the situation would be even worse. And as I mentioned at the beginning, we now have an imposing permanent memorial right on the Vancouver waterfront to those whose lives were cut short by exposure to asbestos. May they rest in peace. We hope you appreciated this edition of On the Line, which examined the use of asbestos and the devastating outcomes of its once widespread use. Huge kudos to Lee Loftus and the BC Labour Heritage Centre and to WorkSafe BC, the Vancouver Convention Centre and the NDP government for their substantial financial contributions to provide us with such a fitting memorial. Thanks to Patricia Wejr for research and the interview with Lee Loftus; to John Mabbott for putting it all together. And as always, the BC Labour Heritage Centre for sponsoring this podcast. We'll see you next time, On the Line. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh.