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Releases

Labour organizations call on BC government to license asbestos removal firms after dangerous exposure puts workers, public at risk

VANCOUVER – The BC Insulators Union, Vancouver-New Westminster Building Trades Council and BC Federation of Labour are calling on the BC government to immediately license asbestos removal firms. The call comes after the BC Supreme Court sentenced a flagrant violator of safety laws to house arrest and following a contractor removing asbestos contaminated drywall from a Vancouver home without adequately protecting workers or nearby neighbours.

Mike Singh, principal of Seattle Environmental Consulting Ltd. and Skylite Building Maintenance Ltd., was sentenced to six weeks house arrest and one year probation by Madam Justice Francesca Marzari on October 29 after being found guilty of contempt of court for not obeying Workers Compensation Board orders on the adequate protection of workers engaged in asbestos removal.

Then last week the Workers Compensation Board issued four stop-work orders against H & B Construction Inc. when neighbours of a house at 4573 West 12th Avenue in Vancouver reported workers removing asbestos-contaminated material from a house being demolished without adequately protecting themselves or nearby residents.

Asbestos is the leading cause of workplace deaths in BC, predominantly from mesothelioma, with 47 work-related deaths recorded in 2018.

“The asbestos removal business is simply out of control and it is critical that the BC government immediately move to license all asbestos removal and consulting firms so workers and residents lives are not being put at risk,” says Neil Munro, business manager for the BC Insulators Union, representing asbestos removal workers. “The flagrant violations happening across the province demand that action be taken to save lives from exposure to deadly asbestos.”

Josh Towsley, president of the Vancouver-New Westminster Building Trades Council, says the Vancouver house demolition case put next door neighbours at risk as well as the workers removing asbestos from outdoor stucco.

“There is absolutely no safe level of asbestos exposure for anyone, worker or neighbour, and this case shows how urgently we need the province to license any company removing asbestos,” said Towsley. “In addition to this outrageous situation, other unscrupulous asbestos removal companies have dumped bags of asbestos-contaminated drywall in back alleys in Vancouver and Burnaby in recent years, meaning anyone could be exposed to this carcinogenic material.”

Laird Cronk, BC Federation of Labour President, said unions and the Federation have been calling for the licensing and regulation of asbestos firms for several years.

“These cases show the pressing need for the BC government to act now,” Cronk said. “They also demonstrate the need for a certified program for workers handling asbestos, as well as more resources to support proactive enforcement and monitoring.”

Munro of the BC Insulators says several other jurisdictions have licensed asbestos removal firms, including Washington and Oregon states, the United Kingdom and Australia.

“The models are there, the need is urgent and people are going to die from asbestos exposure, so let’s get it done and done now,” Munro said.

BC’s labour movement has put forward other concrete recommendations to government to make the removal, transportation and disposal of asbestos contaminated materials safe, including:

- Training and certification of asbestos workers, consultants and surveyors;
- Creation of new disposal sites across BC;
- Establish a rebate program for safe asbestos disposal;
- The Labour Ministry be the lead ministry to implement licensing and changes in coordination with the Workers Compensation Board;
- Develop BC-wide laboratory standards for asbestos testing;
- An awareness program on asbestos exposure in the automotive repair sector, where asbestos lining in brake pads and other parts can put workers at risk;
- Full and fair compensation for workers who develop asbestos-related diseases

BACKGROUND

The Workers Compensation Board had asked for a one-year jail term for Singh, who has been permanently barred from working in the asbestos removal business previously by the court after WorkSafeBC issued over 230 orders to comply with health and safety laws designed to protect workers and communities from asbestos exposure – and after Singh and his companies were fined over $630,000 since 2010.

In a detailed submission to the BC government review, the BC Insulators Union says the Workers Compensation Board issued 764 compliance orders in 2018 – on average two orders every day. And even more disturbingly, the Workers Compensation Board also issued 95 immediate stop work orders to asbestos abatement employers because of the seriousness of the violations and risk to workers.

Munro says that in 2018 alone, the Workers Compensation Board issued 37 administrative penalties related to violations of asbestos regulations totaling $237,386 in fines – but only 17 have been paid in full, with $66,256 collected to-date.

There are other firms that owe hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid fines, with one company at well over $1 million owed to the Workers Compensation Board, Munro added.

And BC Supreme Court has issued 12 injunctions against asbestos employers at the Workers Compensation Board's request – to force them to obey the law, Munro says.

RESOURCES

Decision by Madam Justice Marzari

Global TV story November 15 on Vancouver house being demolished without adequate asbestos protection:

Full BC Insulators Union submission to government on asbestos

BCFED submission to Ministry of Labour on Asbestos.

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