

March, 2006

TRAINING UPDATE
Asbestos

In the 1990's, more construction workers died of disease than as a result of accidents. This was the case in eight of the ten years in the decade. The disease responsible for the greatest number of those deaths was mesothelioma, a form of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. One of the insidious features of mesothelioma is that its onset often takes place years, even decades, after the exposure.

The hazards of asbestos weren't known until the 1970's. Before that, its "miracle" fire-retardant properties resulted in it being used in many construction projects, almost universally for things like insulating pipes and heating ducts. It was used in the construction of the old Terminal 1 at Pearson Airport in Toronto. For the last several years, asbestos **removal** has been the policy, although some products like asbestos tiles (much less dangerous to handle) are still used in construction. When the old Terminal 1 was demolished prior to construction of the new Terminal 1, asbestos removal was a major problem.

For several years, since the discovery of its carcinogenic properties, there have been regulations regarding the use and removal of asbestos. In October, 2005 the Ministry of Labour introduced new regulations for asbestos, and especially for its removal. This month a number of workers and supervisors with experience in asbestos abatement and removal, including members of Local 506, will be meeting with Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities and Ministry of Labour representatives to develop training and testing for Type 3 Asbestos removal. As of November, 2007, all workers involved in Type 3 removal will have to be trained before they can perform the work. When we conduct Asbestos Removal training (as opposed to Asbestos Awareness) at Ambercroft, it takes 40 hours.

Type 3 removal involves the removal of "friable" asbestos – essentially, asbestos which crumbles when handled, becoming loose fibres and dust, like the "fog" after the collapse of World Trade Center September 11, 2001. Workers doing this removal must wear full-face respirators, often uncomfortable when required for long periods of time, and tyvek suits. They must remove the protective apparel and shower before leaving the site.

One of the major problems with asbestos abatement and removal in Ontario is the turnover of workers. Often, when projects start, half or more of the required workers are new and require training. This is largely because the work is underpaid. Elsewhere – Quebec, the US – there is a premium paid for doing asbestos work. In Ontario, the pay rates are lower than for other demolition work and certainly lower than for most work in construction.