



# IBEW British Columbia Provincial Council

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January 17, 2022

The Honourable Harry Bains, M.L.A  
Minister of Labour  
PO Box 9064, Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria, BC, V8W 9E2

**Re: Asbestos Abatement, Training, Awareness and Registries**

Dear Minister Bains,

I would like to start by thanking you and the BC Provincial government for putting the effort into apprenticeship trades training. Without the highest standards and safest learned practices, the gas, line, shipbuilding, and construction and maintenance industries would be fraught with many more injuries and fatalities it typically sees. We believe the same diligence and high level of educational standards are required when looking through the lens of "Asbestos Abatement worker" education and credentialing moving forward.

The reason we are writing you, as you may well know, electrical workers face the highest infliction rate. We spend our working days, pulling our cables through existing walls, floors and ceilings, often disturbing and drawing the fibres along with the cables and directly towards us. As asbestos is a great fire retardant, all electrical conductors prior to 1950 had a woven asbestos covering. Although that was 70 years ago, since then, we have spent every year removing those cables in buildings throughout BC.

Much of the equipment that had an element of generating any heat were also equipped with boards made of asbestos, and as they become dry, they become brittle and when physically forced would break and release fatal fibres in an electrical worker's breathing area. Asbestos has an incredible hang-time of 8 hours. That is how long it takes to reach the floor if dropped at shoulder height. So, the potential of workers breathing it in becomes more likely.

The mining of asbestos in Canada shut-down a few years ago and Canada is no longer exporting this dangerous material abroad to emerging countries to process, however, asbestos domestically is still where it was left, in our walls, ceilings, floors, kitchen equipment, and any other heating products, or products protecting us from heat, like oven mitts and ironing boards.

Asbestos is not unlike a land mine waiting patiently until someone walks by and begins a painful path of their life. Of course, the one is usually immediate while the other prolongs a person's painful existence, the Canadian construction landscape is checkered with these landmines. As a 40-year construction and shipyard electrician, I have witnessed many friends and co-workers diagnosed with pleural plaques on their lungs, and asbestosis, this diagnosis is nothing less than a death sentence. They slowly and prematurely wither away and die an agonizing death due solely from taking a breath, while at work 25-40 years earlier. The ironic and sad legacy of this infliction is all too often their retirement years are robbed from them. For the past 14 years I have served as the Chair of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in British Columbia, an organization of approximately 12,000 electricians, powerline technicians, gas workers, electronic Technicians and Technologists and other assorted workers in BC.

The proliferation of products containing asbestos throughout the industries our members work in over the past 100 plus years will likely go down in modern-day civilized history as one of our worst self-inflicted atrocities in worker health care, and it will not subside for many decades to come. The best we can hope for is to mitigate its relentless indiscriminate impact through good worker safety regulation. So again, thank you for engaging our perspectives on how we can all make necessary changes with a focus on providing better worker protections and saving lives.

Our four-pillar approach would include the following emphasized changes:

1) We are calling on the Provincial Government as well as all municipal governments to audit their buildings and develop and establish a **Provincial Building Registry of all Public Buildings and structures which contain or utilize asbestos laden building products**, and to make that known on any permit drawn to alter said building(s), power generating plants, and other publicly owned structures, and to provide an online registry and make it available to all restoration and construction workers and companies so they may see if the buildings they (will) work in, have asbestos products and what form and floor those products containing the asbestos fibers are in (ie. floor tiles, ceiling tiles, insulation, drywall, pipe and cladding, etc), and how best to remove or responsibly disturb each type of product. We are proposing the Building Registry begin with all public buildings from our legislature, office and administration buildings, schools, hospitals, city halls, and associated real estate and public work yards, and move into the private commercial and business sector in a relatively short time frame. If we can install fire alarm and sprinkler systems in a relatively short time frame, we can do the same with asbestos abatement. We should also identify a number of abandoned mines throughout the province, so we can return the asbestos back to where it came from.

We are also calling on the BC Provincial government which utilize public marine transportation, namely BC Ferries as well as the inland public ferry system, to develop and establish a **Provincial Vessel Registry of all Maritime Vessels which utilize Products and equipment containing asbestos**. That the Registry be available online so that BC marine shipyard workers can obtain the information on the products that could potentially kill them prior to them beginning work on the particular equipment, system or vessel structure. When we properly identify and publish the risks construction/shipyard/ maintenance workers who may disturb asbestos, and remediation and abatement workers face, the Canadian workforce will be better prepared and we will all benefit from reduced exposure. That was essentially the national thrust of 80's safety programs like; "right to know" and "WHMIS".

2) The baby boomer generation is well versed in asbestos we have seen its extraction from our lands, we have used it, we have lived and worked with it all around us. We are on the eve of mass retirement with a new generation of workers who know very little of the harmful effects asbestos exposure can cause.

**We are calling on the BC Provincial government to develop a plan to better educate our youth moving into the construction and heavy industry sectors with the purpose to help identify products made with asbestos and those which can often contain asbestos, as well as establish the last week of April as "Asbestos Awareness" week.**

This would be in-step with our closest neighbor and largest trading partner, the USA who have proclaimed the first week of April dedicated to the same cause. Why we are suggesting the last week of April is due to April 28<sup>th</sup>, which is globally known as the Day of Mourning, a day recognized to honour those who lost their lives while at work, and the number one fatal illness in Canada are those workers who died from inhaling asbestos dust. We believe the highest level of respect we can give those who lost their lives while at work is to fight for those who continue to do the job, to educate the living against the dangers, so they can return home to their loved ones.

**3) We are also recommending that a BC Provincial standard apprenticeship be developed known as "Hazmat Worker" so those that are involved in remediation have the developed skills and knowledge in proper procedure of remediation of asbestos products and other dangerous materials.** Today these workers are lucky to receive any information of the asbestos product they are removing, how to remove it safely and maybe a throwaway pair of coveralls and a dust mask. Many of them are hired by a labour broker as an independent contractor so they have no recourse to the unsafe work. When they are poorly trained, they compromise the safety of all workers on every job, and any of the general public who are nearby. The IBEW is in complete agreement with developing standard training for asbestos abatement workers.

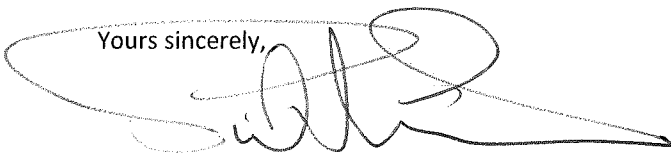
**4) Lastly, we are calling on the BC Provincial Government to move forward on Legislation requiring Asbestos Abatement Contractors be qualified by training and licensing with TechSafety BC.** This Licensing would be similar for all electrical contractors, gas, plumbing, pressure vessel contractors, as well as those choosing to work on tramways and ski-lifts, escalators and elevators in BC for example.

The construction industry can be incredibly unscrupulous and disenfranchised with their own workers safety. This change will bring a sense of legitimacy and professionalism to the subject work being performed, and for those who choose to ignore the requirements of licensing and proper training should face serious penalty for doing so.

British Columbians look to their elected officials to champion the causes that serve and protect them, it is our own elected officials who for the past century have allowed this travesty to continue and spread with full knowledge of the personal anguish, pain and sorrow it was causing workers. It is time to write a new chapter on this tragic story, with pages of training, transparency, understanding and knowledge. We look forward to seeing real action with measurable results on this file in the names of those who have given their lives, their families that were left behind, as well as those young adults entering the trades today.

I would like to thank you for your time in reading our recommendations and look forward to a day when every worker can obtain the information, they need to do their job in the safest way possible.

Yours sincerely,



Phil Venoit, RSE  
Chair  
IBEW-BC

cc: Jim Lofty, BM IBEW Local 213  
Doug McKay, BM Local 258  
Glen Hilton, BM Local 993  
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