

Toxic Struggles: Asbestos in Argentina's Subway

Jorge Afarian

In 2018, the Argentinian Trade Union Association of Subway Workers (AGTSyP) became aware of the presence of asbestos in the Madrid Metro in Spain, specifically in CAF 5000 model trains. Due to the extreme toxicity of this material, which can cause diseases such as lung cancer or pleural mesothelioma, a Madrid subway worker was experiencing serious health difficulties. This same model of train had been acquired through direct purchase by the City of Buenos Aires (36 wagons) from the Government of Madrid in 2011. Asbestos has been banned in Argentina since 2001, meaning that this acquisition was conducted illegally.

The AGTSyP began to demand the removal and disposal of asbestos throughout the transport network, placing it on the daily agenda, especially as asbestos contamination was confirmed from most of the lines, across trains, tunnels and repair workshops. Some work has been carried out by companies specialized in asbestos removal, mostly in the Rancagua workshop of Line B, but these efforts have only been partial. Beyond asbestos, subway transport is inherently harmful to the health of workers, as it can lead to vision and hearing problems, disruption of the heart's circadian rhythm, and exposure to toxins that affect the human metabolism, among others (Rubio 2024). However, these other conditions have not had the same impact on workers' perceptions, especially in terms of their lethality and severity, as they are considered "occupationally acceptable" (Douglas 1986).



Asbestos-contaminated material ready for removal, Buenos Aires.
Photo: Jorge Afarian, 2019.

The concept of toxic infrastructures is useful for rethinking categories such as health hazards and the acceptability of risk, especially when examining the dichotomy between what is acceptable or unacceptable in a form of transport that is seen as a symbol of modernity and progress (Zunino 2013). At the same time, though, workers experience this symbolism of progress in the context of the ban on asbestos in the country, the diseases it may cause in the future and the potential to affect passengers, who are ultimately the recipients of that 'modernity'.

"A little less lung..."

A recurring theme with the workers I interviewed is the greater danger posed by asbestos compared to other typical workplace-related ailments. Working in the subway has long served as a form of "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012) toward workers, but asbestos contamination has added new dimensions and actors to this violence, creating "disposable lives" (Fassin 2018) in favor of capital accumulation. The disposable lives in question are those of the workers, but also those of their families and the passengers of the transport system, although only a small fraction of the latter perceive it.

In 2019, during my fieldwork, I talked to Pablo, paint-booth worker and union delegate:

We know we go deaf here because there are older colleagues who struggle to hear. Many young colleagues might have been affected faster. Vision too—when we go outside in the summer, your eyes hurt, and you notice it. The thing is, when we fought against unhealthy conditions ¹, it was about whether you had a bit more hearing or a bit more or less vision. But this asbestos issue, it's not about whether you have a little more lung capacity or less.

¹ The "unhealthy conditions" refer to a conflict from 2002-2004 between workers and the subway companies that focused on the high decibel levels affecting hearing.

Pablo's comments reveal a certain hierarchy in health problems—between what is expected or acceptable in an environment known to be unhealthy, such as hearing impairment or vision loss, and what should never be, like asbestos contamination. It is worth emphasizing the lethality of asbestos for the body: while one can live with reduced hearing or vision, damage to the lungs is inherently life threatening. This view is reinforced by José, an electro-mechanical worker and union delegate:

While they were sending us for routine tests, it's within the scope of what we do. You think about the risks insurer and how they might compensate you in a lawsuit for hearing and vision loss, an injury from a metal piece that fell and broke your foot, the accepted workplace risks [in this industry]. But when they give you a scan because of asbestos, they're looking for lung cancer.

José highlights that diseases from asbestos exposure do not fall under what is considered to be an acceptable risk. Subway work causes illnesses that reduce workers' quality of life, but it is expected within this particular working environment. In contrast, asbestos implies the risk of cancer, which is not accepted.



Although there are some protective measures that can be taken to safeguard against asbestos exposure, such as wearing a mask, these tools are not provided to the workers (let alone the passengers) by the companies that manage the subway service and were only used by the specialized firms that carried out the asbestos removal. This serves as a reminder of the neglect that workers face from both the state and the companies involved (Emova and SBASE), while also exemplifying the invisible and “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) inflicted on the bodies of workers and passengers.

Subway worker wearing a protective mask, Buenos Aires.

Photo: Jorge Afarian, 2019.

Latency and Slow Violence

The long latency period of diseases related to asbestos means that illnesses may manifest several years or even decades after the last exposure. Workers identify this as a form of uncertainty about the possibility of becoming ill, highlighting the inescapability of a future diagnosis, a matter that has been analyzed with regard to other toxic substances (Welcome 2021; Graeter 2022; Kopf 2024).

This characteristic aligns with what is known as slow violence, as latency is invisible; there is no set date when disease might appear, but the danger very much remains, never disappearing (Hecht 2018). Moreover, the perpetrators of infrastructural violence and slow violence here are the state and the companies involved in the maintenance and operation of the transport service, because they were who introduced this toxin

into the environment. This adds another dimension to the fundamental conflict between capital and labor and the power disparity between these two forces, as there is not only a struggle for wages and working conditions but also a fight for the environment and for public health.

José describes it this way:

So we're constantly waiting for terrible events to unfold, because there will be people getting sick. The disease has a latency period of thirty to forty years, and usually, the effects are detected after that time.



Worker wearing a skeleton suit at a trade union protest against asbestos, Buenos Aires.
Photo: Ramón Acuña, 2021.

Ernesto, another electro-mechanical worker on the subway who is already affected by pleural plaques caused by asbestos, describes his predicament:

So far, eleven affected colleagues have pleural plaques—I am one of them—which is the first sign of the fiber's impact on the body. The situation could stay like this for thirty or forty years, right up until the day I die from other causes, or it could just as easily lead to asbestosis or to lung cancer, or pleural mesothelioma, which is fatal.

Latency thus appears in the form of personal uncertainty, with doubts about when illness could emerge. Although the disease might not be there physically, it is ever present in the workers' minds, as they constantly ponder a possible negative outcome. In many cases, workers have handled asbestos-contaminated material for over twenty years without being informed or protected by the state or companies.

Public Health

Asbestos does not differentiate between passengers and workers; its fibers can enter the bodies of passengers using public transport and even brief exposure can lead to disease in the future. This is another characteristic that sets asbestos contamination apart from other workplace-related conditions, which only affect subway workers. Roberto, a repair-shop employee, emphasizes this aspect:

There's an issue about the public health and passenger safety, because anyone who travels on the subway is at risk. They're riding on trains that are spreading contamination, moving back and forth through tunnels, dispersing microfibers. It's clearly a health issue for both workers and passengers.

Pedro, another shop worker, also comments on the matter:

The public still thinks asbestos is only a worker issue because we handle the asbestos. The thing is, obviously, we're in there for six hours. But the people riding the subway are also exposed because the bituminous paint, which contains blue asbestos, covers the entire interior of the subway.

This is why the AGTSyP has carried out numerous actions to raise public awareness of the asbestos issue. While there was little communication with passengers at the beginning, interest grew as the actions progressed. While this mode of transport aims to enhance passenger comfort, reduce risks and avoid traffic congestion, it also introduces new hazards (Howe et al. 2016). This case proves that modernity does not always align with improved health.

Conclusion

Subway transport has introduced numerous risks since its construction. Alongside the many possible ailments typical of an unhealthy working environment, asbestos adds a new level of risk, with the potential to cause cancer not only for the workers but also in passengers. However, these conditions, far from intimidating those affected, have generated forms of union resistance, which seek improvements and emphasize the prohibition, lethality, public health and environmental impact of asbestos. The experience of subway workers shows us that the best way to protect health and the environment is through collective care, ensuring a sustainable future for all.

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Author:



Jorge Afarian obtained his PhD in Labour Law from the Faculty of Law, University of Buenos Aires in 2023, where he continues to work as a Researcher and Professor. Currently, Jorge is part of the Postdoctoral Fellowship Program at the Institute for Legal Research in the National Autonomous University of Mexico, supervised by Dr Enrique Mauricio Padrón Innamorato. His research focuses on labour precarization, union action in health and environmental issues, and the co-management of occupational risks between companies and unions.

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