

Battery factory worker suffering from lead poisoning cheated out of compensation

Tuesday 8 June 2010, by [YANG David](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2010).

Beijing-based journalist, David Yang recently investigated the case of a battery factory worker in the northeastern province of Jilin who was diagnosed with acute lead poisoning and renal failure but could not get adequate compensation because the authorities, apparently in collusion with his employer, refused to classify his injury as work-related.

An edited version of Mr Yang's article follows.

Working eight hours a day, Song Qinchang did all he could to support his family - an ailing wife and 15-year-old daughter in junior high school - with his 1,000 yuan monthly salary from the battery factory he had worked at for the last 27 years.

"I hope my daughter can go to college one day and then things will get better," said 45-year-old Song.

However, last September he was diagnosed with acute lead poisoning and renal failure. "I was dumbfounded when I was transferred to the intensive care unit and the doctor said we needed to pay 5,000 yuan up front," Song recalled, "I felt like the sky was falling in."

Song Qinchang was born in 1966 in Antu county, a small town north of the Changbai Mountains in Yanbian Korean autonomous prefecture in Jilin. After graduating from junior high school in 1983, Song got a job at Antu County Battery Factory, mixing paste on the battery acid production line. "I thought I was very strong and healthy and the lead wouldn't cause any trouble," Song said. "Plus there're so many of my co-workers doing the same job everyday."

In 1999, the factory was taken over by the Hong Kong-listed Coslight Group [\[1\]](#), a Harbin-based company that manufactures battery and power supply products. The factory was renamed Yanbian Coslight Storage Battery, but, for workers like Song, the name was the only thing that changed.

"The factory looks exactly the same as it was in the 80s," said one of Song's fellow workers. "You can smell the sour and salty dust of lead in the workshop. And we have nothing to protect ourselves except masks and gloves."

The only treatment for workers suffering from lead poisoning was chelation therapy, the administration of chelating agents through intravenous injections to remove heavy metals from the body. Chelation therapy is widely used for workers in the lead battery industry in China, and is relatively safe if the dosage and infusion rates are correctly administered by a medical professional. In Song's case however, instead of sending Song and his colleagues to the local clinic for treatment,

on September 18 last year, his manager told someone at the factory to give him the injection instead. Immediately after the injection, Song felt nauseous, extreme pain in his abdomen and experienced problems breathing. He was then sent to Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture Hospital where he stayed for the next two months at a cost of 40,000 yuan.

However, management only contributed 4,000 yuan to Song's medical bills and even that amount was subsequently deducted from his housing allowance in the following months. Song was forced to sell the apartment he had bought five years earlier and rent a smaller one for around 500 yuan a month.

In October, Song applied to the prefecture labour and medical authorities for confirmation of his work-related injury but was told that lead poisoning was not considered to be an occupational illness. This, despite the fact that lead poisoning is clearly listed on the Directory of Occupational Illnesses (职业病目录) (Section 3 - Occupational Poisoning) issued by the Departments of Health and Labour in 2002.

The officials claimed they "did everything according to the regulations." But a neighbour of Song's family later told them that he saw Coslight people taking the doctors to dinner the day before the adjudication.

Song's brother-in-law, Mr. Kong wrote petition letters and started campaigning on Song's behalf. Believing that the county authorities were "afraid that Coslight, a major contributor to the local tax coffers, would reduce its investment in the area," Kong went straight to the prefecture Labour Bureau and the Politics and Law Committee. The results however were disappointing.

In February 2010, a man in Kong's community came to his door, told him that he needs to trust the Communist Party and not to create fuss during the upcoming National People's Congress (NPC). "I do trust the Party," Kong replied, "but will you help me solve the problem?"

The following month, during the NPC, Mr. Wang, an official from the Jilin Provincial Petition Bureau told Kong that everything will be fine and the problem will be addressed.

The same month, the Antu county government asked Coslight to cover Song's outstanding medical bills and resume paying his salary. But no compensation deal was mentioned. Song's family are still concerned however that without certification of his occupational illness, the deal could end any day. The county government official in charge of the case promised to allocate an apartment for Song's family, but it never materialized.

Kong tried to sue the Coslight factory and the local clinic for failing to provide proper medical care but the case was rejected by the Antu County Court.

Citing the example of Zhang Haichao [2], who has become a national hero for workers with occupational illness, Kong has vowed to "never give up on this case because we stand for justice."

Meanwhile, on 2 April, Li Zhule, a worker in the same workshop as Song, reportedly died after being diagnosed with moderate lead poisoning last year. His family is still waiting for the autopsy report.

P.S.

* From China Labour Bulletin:

<http://www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100760>

* Mr Yang is the editor of China Sports Review.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cncoslight.com/English/index.asp>

[2] <http://news.qq.com/zt/2010/Chinese/zhc.htm>