

Asbestos: the fight goes on

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The nightmare health scenario created by the use of asbestos in a wide range of production activities is now beyond question. Simply, estimates vary with the source. It is safe to say that, of all the carcinogens used at work, asbestos has exacted the highest toll of victims and will continue to do so for ten or fifteen years to come. The International Labour Organization estimates the death toll at around 100 000 a year worldwide.

Most industrialized countries have slashed their asbestos use. Even in countries where it is not yet outlawed, asbestos is now little-used. Canada – which leads the asbestos lobby's world campaign – exports almost all its asbestos production to Asia and Latin America, consuming very little on the home market.

The world picture is that most of the risk has shifted to the highly populated regions of Asia and has to a lesser extent stayed in most of the former Soviet republics. Out of an estimated world consumption of approximately 2.1 million tonnes in 2003, Asia accounted for approximately 1 million tonnes, and the former eastern bloc republics around 800 000. Within Asia, the most developed countries like Japan and South Korea have been eliminating asbestos from their production, leaving a group of six countries – China, India, Thailand, Iran, Vietnam and Indonesia – as the heaviest users.

We therefore see two layers of social inequality stacked up on one another. In each country, whatever its level of economic development, asbestos-related diseases mainly affect the working class. Globally, the coming decades' victims will be mainly concentrated in particular developing countries where it is often difficult to get an independent trade union movement off the ground.

This labour dynamic is one reason for the long-overdue world asbestos ban. The brutal exploitation of workers is manifested in the biological reality of their bodies by asbestos-related cancers. Preventing these cancers is not given priority because by and large, they do not affect the well-to-do.

When asbestos was banned in the European Union (EU) in 1999, it looked like the message had finally

got over and a world asbestos ban was just around the corner. Alas, not so. Production fell sharply at the start of the 1990s. World asbestos output dropped from some 4 million to 2.4 million tonnes between 1990 and 1994, only to level off thereafter. Production fluctuations mainly reflect economic conditions, especially in the construction industry. Output was 2.26 million tonnes in 1997, and 2.29 million ten years later. The six big producers who make up the bulk of world production stayed the same – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Brazil, Canada and Zimbabwe – while consumption showed a marked shift towards a group of Asian countries: India, China, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. Elsewhere, it has trended downwards.

Three recent events, analysed in the following pages, point up the importance of the fight for a world asbestos ban.

- The debates going on in the EU about allowing continued asbestos imports in spite of a policy that supports a world ban show the need to put our own house in order. The chemical industry lobby is focusing on a minor economic issue. The few firms that still use asbestos in electrolysis cells could make the change by investing a little in modernizing their production processes. But the political issue is a crucial one. It is about point-scoring by the chemical industry as REACH is rolled out to set a precedent where economic considerations win out over health protection.
- History will be made when two former Eternit senior executives go on trial in Turin. For the first time, a criminal court will consider the liability of the top-level executives of a multinational group who had no direct management responsibility for their subsidiary companies. The trial also puts Europe's responsibilities firmly on the line. It is a matter of record that the Eternit group operated a policy of double standards by continuing to expose workers in Latin America and Asia to asbestos while eliminating the mineral from its European plants.
- The Rotterdam Convention has hit a brick wall from the inability to get chrysotile asbestos added to the list of substances for which Prior Informed Consent is required before export. This highlights the hypocrisy of Canada's controlled asbestos use campaigns. Where is the control if an importing country is not informed and its consent not sought? ■