

**THE CENTER FOR TRADE UNION AND WORKERS SERVICES (CTUWS)**  
**PROHIBITING ASBESTOS INDUSTRY IN EGYPT**  
**SUCCESS FOR THE ORA-EGYPT WORKERS AND THE CAMPAIGN OF "CTUWS"**  
**CAMPAIGN CONTINUES FOR PROTECTING WORKERS RIGHTS**

A few days before the end of 2004 Mr. Ahmed Lukmah owner of ORA-Egypt Company issued a decision of arbitrary dismissal of 46 workers as if he wanted the year to come to an end with an embodied model of the year's injustice and strife.

However, the new year witnessed a big victory for the asbestos workers who launched a long struggle in defence of their rights to a clean environment free from the lethal asbestos dusts. The Minister of Foreign Trade and Industry issued a decision that prohibited importing all types of asbestos materials and they are no longer allowed to enter Egypt whatever the cause of importation might be. (The decision excluded the deals already shipped to Egypt or for which letters of credit were opened with the approval of the Ministry). The Decision prohibited as well the manufacture or production of any material containing asbestos (other than the projects that already obtained a prior approval to import their requirements until the imported quantities are consumed, provided this process takes place under the supervision of the Industrial Control Authority).

In Egypt there are 11 companies at least that produce asbestos. They employ thousand of workers. But the workers of ORA-Egypt Company in the 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan City were the first lines that opened the asbestos file with their struggle and protests that continued a few years ago and reached its summit last June.

In solidarity with the workers of ORA-Egypt Company for Asbestos Products CTUWS organized a its campaign which started last June and is still continuous calling for prohibiting the importation and production of this lethal material, enabling the affected workers to obtain fair indemnity and ensuring the rights of all the workers in this industry. CTUWS called upon all the labour forces and defenders of the social and economic rights to support the legitimate rights of the asbestos workers and the fair demands of ORA-Egypt workers. CTUWS was keen at the same time to submit a formal complaint to the International Labour Organization (ILO) on 17 June 2004 and contacted various international trade union federations and organizations calling upon them to announce their support for ORA-Egypt workers' rights such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the International Federation for Building and Wood Workers Industries and the International Federation of Services and many European trade union organizations. CTUWS also contacted the World Asbestos Prohibition Network and the International Network for Combating Cancer.

The serious risks that arise from exposure to this material led the ILO at its 72nd Session issued is Convention No. 162 that bans handling and exposure to asbestos products except under very strict conditions. Many people called for total prohibition at the international level of asbestos production. Although the Government of Egypt did not sign the ILO Convention No. 162, it had accepted the recommendations of the ILO and the World Health Organization (WHO) issued in 1998 concerning asbestos. However the pressures of money and business made it retreat after less than two and half months by issuing a new ministerial decision (No. 97 for the year 1999) that allowed companies to import asbestos and to exclude it from the prohibition list until conformity of these companies is attained.

Since ORA-Egypt workers discovered the dangers of asbestos (which their employer have totally concealed from them) they launched a long struggle in defence of their right to live and to enforce the occupational health and safety regulations until the decision issued by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration under No. 85 for the year 2002 to close down the ORA Company. The decision listed seven conditions to be provided in the work site before the company is allowed to operate again.

But the owner of the company (Mr. Ahmed Lukmah) managed to go around the ministerial decision and he implemented just one of the seven conditions. The company continued to work ignoring the necessary health and safety precautions. The halls are free from any ventilation system. Wastes are disposed of carelessly by throwing them anywhere to pollute the air and the soil. Exposure rates exceed any acceptable rates. Victims are falling day after day, while the General Organization of Health Insurance refuses to consider their diseases as occupational diseases. This is proved by the Organization's reports that deprive them from the remaining part of the right to medicine and medical care.

The workers had no other way but to strengthen their movement. The company was closed as from January 2004 until the conditions stipulated by the ministerial decree are met.

Although the company's monthly profits exceed Four Egyptian Million Pounds, and the wages of a worker who served the company since its opening in 1983 does not exceed Three Hundred Egyptian Pounds, the owner of the company Mr. Ahmed Lukmah – in stead of conforming with the conditions and adopting the occupational health and safety procedures – used a different method of pressure on the government and stopped the payment of the workers wages as from last April.

In June 2004 the company's workers and their trade union committee sat in calling for their wages and to allow the reopening of the company only after the ministerial conditions are satisfied. They also called for fair indemnities for the workers suffering from cancer as a result of working in asbestos, complete medical treatment for them and covering them with the protection systems applied for protecting workers in hazardous industries.

The workers returned to their factory after negotiations that helped them obtain their wages and some of their usurped rights. However, there are still suspending issues such as occupational health and safety and the right to indemnity. CTUWS continued its campaign calling for the closure of the company. ORA-Egypt workers continued their march. Sixty of them gather in the Administrative Court House of Ismailia on 4/7/2004. It is the Court that considers the dispute between the Government and the Company concerning closure of the company due to failure to provide the occupational health and safety procedures. The workers call for closing the factory until the application of all the necessary procedures. The company owner appealed decision of the Minister of Manpower to close the company which is as a matter fact operating by virtue of a decision issued by the Utilities Committee of the Cabinet; a Committee that nobody knows where did it get the authority to issue such a decision.

The workers rights were not the sole objective of CTUWS' campaign concerning ORA-Egypt. It also defended the rights of the people who live in the polluted and ignored area around the company. Asbestos wastes are supposed to be disposed of properly in landfills with special specifications. But they are thrown behind the flour mills of the 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan City. The workers who are aware of the problem chase the trucks that carry asbestos wastes and inform the State Ministry of Environmental Affairs and the other concerned agencies thereof. The campaign gets escalated. All the details were transferred from CTUWS' Journal "Saout Al Sanayiya" to the newspaper of "Al Tajammu" opposition political party, then to Ros Al Yousef weekly magazine and some governmental newspapers. The voice of the workers mixed with that of their supporters who send messages of support from all over the world to the concerned bodies calling upon them to interfere to save the asbestos workers. Ros Al Yousef weekly magazine alone received over 800 messages of support after the publication of the report on ORA-Egypt.

The campaign escalated again in October to reach the People's Assembly (the Parliament). A Member of the Parliament called for an urgent action to make those who let the company operate before satisfying the legal requirements accountable for what they have done. The Health Committee of the People's Assembly saw very hot discussions of the asbestos problem and ORA-Egypt workers.

The campaign realized its first victory when a Ministerial Committee subject to the Cabinet was formed to consider the problem. It comprises the Ministers of Health, Environment, Manpower, Housing, Tourism and Supplies and the Governor of Cairo. The Committee issued its decision to close the company until the occupational health and safety requirement are satisfied. At the same time the Health Committee of the People's Assembly recommended that the Government of Egypt signs the ILO Convention No. 162, closes ORA-Egypt Company and ask the Egyptian Trade Union Federation to move for safeguarding the workers of the company.

CTUWS is continuing its campaign at the international level. It took part in a workshop on asbestos hazards organized within the framework of the Social European Forum (London, October 2004) and elaborated on the case of ORA-Egypt Company and their fair demands. It also participated in the international conference on asbestos held in Tokyo from 19 to 2 November 2004 and in ICFTU's workshop on Asbestos issues. All these international forums and gatherings call for the international prohibition of asbestos and the fair indemnification of the affected workers.

Then the Minister of Foreign Trade and Industry issued a decision that prohibited the importation and production of asbestos. It was a big victory, but it does not mean that our campaign is halted because the enforcement of this decision is still confronted with difficulties. The destiny of the asbestos workers – not only the ORA workers but all the workers of the asbestos industry - is still vague. These victims had but one severe option: either to starve till death or to die because of asbestos and cancer.

Forty six workers of ORA-Egypt were fired on Saturday 25 December 2004 as a punishment for opening the asbestos file in Egypt and because they sat in their company calling for their rights to fair wages and indemnity.

While CTUWS considers the Decision of the Minister of Foreign Trade and Industry a victory and a progressive step and hopes that it will be enforced, it calls upon you to continue your support for the asbestos workers so that they do not bear alone the price of protecting the people and the environment against asbestos. Meanwhile, CTUWS emphasize two important demands:

- To provide clean job opportunities for asbestos workers dismissed from the companies that will be closed. They should be entitled to compensations equivalent to their wages until such opportunities are provided.
- To secure the rights of the victims of occupational diseases related to asbestos for getting fair indemnity according to the rules issued in this concern by the International Labour Organization.