

Asbestos and substitute fibres: international trade unions demand ratification of ILO Convention No. 162

On 15 October 1997, the ICFTU called a meeting of trade union experts from Europe, America, Africa and other continents to discuss man-made mineral and vitreous fibres. The meeting stemmed from the ICFTU's campaign for international conventions, especially ILO Convention No. 162 on safety in the use of asbestos, and aimed to review the use of asbestos and asbestos substitute fibres. There follows an overview of the discussions, the conclusions reached by ICFTU and the Spanish trade unions analysis' of asbestos use in Spain, which has ratified the ILO Convention but ranks among the opponents of a Europe-wide asbestos ban.

The ETUC and TUTB sent speakers to the seminar. ETUC Deputy General Secretary Erik Carlslund put the ETUC's case¹ for an EU-wide ban on the marketing of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials and ratification of ILO Convention No. 162 by all Union countries. Arguing from the experience of trade unions in many countries and industries, he said that a marketing ban was a priority of any policy to significantly reduce workers' exposure to a recognized carcinogen - asbestos (see previous article).

P. Bofetta, head of the Lyons-based IARC, reviewed case studies on man-made mineral fibres (MMMFs), stressing the unreliability of the epidemiological findings and in vitro tests as evidence of carcinogenicity. L. D. Schuman of the American OSHA reported on new precautionary rules brought in by different federal agencies requiring such fibres to be treated as carcinogens.

TUTB staff researcher Karola Grodzki outlined the twin-track European legislative framework: the article 118A Directive on protecting workers from the risks related to exposure to carcinogens - which requires employers to replace carcinogens "in so far as is technically possible" (article 4) and is in line with ILO Convention No. 162 (article 10) - and the provisions restricting the marketing of dangerous substances. Karola also reviewed the European debates on the classification of mineral fibres².

The Canadian trade unions explained their draft model code of practice on safety in the use of man-made fibres (manufacture, production, fitting/laying and removal), which is currently under discussion with Canadian material manufacturers. The code sets out manufacturing and production technologies, describes health effects and suggests recommended working practices, choices of PPE, workplace supervision, ...³.

The participants, from asbestos and MMMF-producing, -processing and -user countries, countries that have banned marketing of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials, and countries seeking to limit asbestos exposure, reached agreement on:

- the need for all ILO member countries to ratify ILO Convention No. 162;
- a call to the Workers' Group of the ILO Governing Body to initiate a country-by-country progress review of ratification and problems encountered;
- the need to develop a coherent materials evaluation system to facilitate substitution based on principles of health protection for workers and the public;

- the pressing need to set up institutions to help workers negotiate industrial restructuring on economic and environmental grounds.

The participants recommended:

- widening the scope of the ILO Conventions on carcinogens and man-made mineral fibres;
- setting occupational exposure limits for mineral fibres;
- that the ILO should draw up and adopt a code of practice on insulating fibres (the most common fibre product).

“Asbestos multinationals in Brazil do what they would never dare in Europe”

ICEM, the world federation of asbestos industry unions, is up in arms against European asbestos producers who are getting round the ban on marketing and use in Europe by continuing to produce and sell their products in developing countries in appalling working conditions. Saint-Gobain and Eternit are two major culprits. ICEM wants the EU ban on asbestos extended to countries where European asbestos multinationals operate.

ICEM Global, No. 2 1997, p. 5 and 6.

KILLER ASBESTOS

There is no such thing as safe asbestos, warns an ICEM information brochure which exposes the dangers of asbestos for workers and their families and suggests ways for workers and trade unions to fight it.

The brochure *Mortel amiante* is available from ICEM, 109 Avenue Emile de Béco, B-1050 Brussels. Fax 32 2 6484316.

¹ Adopted by the ETUC March 97 Executive Committee.

² The committee established by Directive 67/548 has since adopted an amendment to annex I covering mineral fibres.

³ FTQ, Montreal, October 1997.