

Eternit and Saint-Gobain in Brazil

Eternit-Brazil is a company controlled by the French multinational Saint-Gobain and Eternit Switzerland¹. One of its units has been producing asbestos cement in Osasco, near Sao Paulo, for more than 50 years. The company medical services have reported a rash of pulmonary fibrosis cases, very few cases of asbestosis, and no incidences of cancer at all. Most of the sick workers have been pressured to leave without making an official occupational disease report.

Outlawing asbestos is a hot political issue in Brazil at present. Brazilian trade unions and various political groups want the fibre banned. The federal executive, headed by Mr F.H Cardoso, is against prohibition and is backing the asbestos lobby's call for controlled use of the carcinogen.

Labour inspectorate engineer Fernanda Giannasi is an outspoken contributor to these public debates. She has also published an Internet manifesto condemning the asbestos industry for funding articles in medical magazines which play down the risks of asbestos.

The manifesto also condemned Eternit Brazil's out-of-court offers of compensation from 5,000 to 15,000 reais (a real is about 0.7 ECU) to former employees suffering from asbestosis. The "financial assistance" and company-medical care plan were *ex gratia* offerings to former workers in exchange for dropping all rights and claims to damages for being exposed to asbestos. They included a particularly cynical provision designed to turn the asbestos victims into a lever of influence for the asbestos industries, whereby Eternit's obligations would cease if it were unable to achieve its company object or carry on its production activity. In other words, if Brazil outlaws asbestos, the victims would forfeit even the pittance they have.

Eternit has brought a prosecution against Fernanda Giannasi for "criminal libel" under article 144 of the Brazilian Criminal Code. The case is currently before the criminal courts.

Both the pressure put on doctors and scientists, and the scandalous agreements with ex-workers, have been widely condemned in Brazil and abroad.

Sao Paulo's civil courts have thrown out the agreements as illegal transactions by which "*Eternit sought by the worst means to avoid a damaging court judgement*".

Fernanda Giannasi seems likely to have been targeted for the key role she played in organizing asbestos victims, especially former Eternit workers in Osasco, who she has helped in getting medical checks and investigating the deaths of their former work colleagues. This has stopped Eternit and doctors in league with it from covering up the extent of the problems. Of the 764 medical examinations performed up to 16 October 1998, 70 cases of asbestosis were found among persons still living, 2 deaths due to asbestosis, 154 cases of pleural plaques, 97 cases of impaired respiratory functions, 3 cases of asbestos-induced lung cancer in persons still living, 1 death from pleural mesothelioma, 5 lung cancer deaths, 7 deaths from gastrointestinal cancer and 28 as-yet unresolved deaths linked to respiratory or gastrointestinal diseases.

¹ Both of whom also hold controlling interests in Brazil's main asbestos mining company working the Minaçu mine in the State of Goiás.

The prosecution brought by Saint-Gobain's Brazilian subsidiary is an attempt to smother free speech in a vital social debate, and to intimidate the movement for an asbestos ban in Brazil. Eternit Brazil's actions have been widely condemned by asbestos research scientists. Saint-Gobain unions in France have warned of possible action if their firm fails to get its subsidiary to drop the complaint.

Further information and messages of solidarity: Fernanda Giannasi: fernanda@base.com.br