

"Doing away with asbestos" : what strategy for health protection ?

The trade union fight against asbestos didn't end with the EU's total ban on new asbestos use.

Wrecked health due to asbestos will remain a big issue for some years to come, so there must be no let-up in the pressure. The trade union strategy centres on several fronts.

Better legal protection for workers who use asbestos

A revision of the Community Asbestos Directive is in hand. The ETUC has already criticized the Commission's stance on several points. As a point of principle, any exposure limit set should be AT BEST no higher than the lowest exposure limit value currently allowed in a Community State. The point is that no exposure limit offers total protection from carcinogens, so the aim must be to achieve the lowest exposure limit value technically possible. Trade unions also demand that :

- The new directive must not exclude any form of work or sector. Special attention must be paid to seeing that it covers self-employed workers.
- All asbestos removal work must be carried out by contractors approved on the basis of appropriate criteria (industrial training, proper protective equipment, experience of this type of worksite, etc.).

Public registers of asbestos-containing buildings

These are essential on at least two counts.

- The rules on worksites where workers are exposed to asbestos are unworkable without a prior assessment of the buildings concerned. In practice, the worst asbestos exposure seems not to occur on asbestos removal sites but on other building conversion or demolition sites where the presence of asbestos was either not known about or was deliberately concealed.
- A series of recent studies also highlight the threats posed by environmental contamination by asbestos - asbestos-containing buildings tend to be places where people live and work.

Recognition of asbestos-related occupational diseases

Recognition of asbestos-related occupational diseases still faces many hurdles in all EU countries. It is a textbook example of the social injustices created

by the failure to harmonize the criteria for recognition of occupational diseases. A study of the 1995 data¹ revealed continuing gaps between EU countries over recognition of mesothelioma (lung cancer caused by asbestos).

In 1995, the United Kingdom recorded 1,139 male deaths from mesothelioma and 659 recognized cases - a rate of 58% of recognized cases for all deaths. The rate was 61% for Germany, 14% for France, 12% for Sweden, and 5% for Italy with 34 cases of recognized occupational disease in 653 mesothelioma deaths. Clearly, these data are not comparable "as is" because of differences in cancer mortality records. What they do, however, is show the divides that no objective data on non-occupational asbestos exposure can explain away.

There is every good reason to suppose that under-recognition of asbestos-related lung cancer is even higher. The data on asbestosis also reveal significant disparities. Incidences can vary from 1 to 96. So, for an all-EU average of 30 asbestosis cases per million workers recognized as occupational diseases, there is 1 case per million in Portugal, 2 in Greece and Spain, 13 in Italy, 28 in the United Kingdom, 30 in France, 59 in Germany and 96 in Belgium.

Recognition of all asbestos-related occupational diseases cannot be divorced from improvements in national systems for recognizing occupational diseases in line with the guidelines laid down in the different Community Recommendations on the matter (the 1962, 1966 and 1990 Recommendations). The evidence is that simple recommendations are no way to achieve the aims set.

There is also an indissoluble link between recognition of occupational diseases, registration of exposed individuals, and public health system recording of the different types of cancer. Making linkages between these types of records is clearly crucial.

The recognition of occupational diseases must go in hand with improved treatments.

Bringing the death merchants to book

The dangers of asbestos were known about at the beginning of the 20th century. Since at least the 1960s, there has been a consistent-enough body of evidence to warrant banning asbestos. Legal



¹ The figures cited here are taken from A. Karjalainen and S. Virtanen, *European Statistics on Occupational Diseases. Evaluation of the 1995 Pilot Data*, Luxembourg: Eurostat, 1999.

action against those directly responsible for exposing workers to asbestos is especially important given that the flat-rate compensation provided by occupational disease compensation schemes comes nowhere near what could be obtained as full compensation in liability proceedings. It is also important to make the political point that, when it comes to occupational health, criminal acts should not be tolerated in the way they traditionally have been.

Policing the activities of European firms in third countries

European firms continue to operate to a double standard in third countries. Prevention policies are implemented in Europe, but not elsewhere in the world. This is a problem not confined to asbestos alone.

Ban the export of asbestos-containing waste to third countries

The most worrying aspect of the policy of exporting toxic waste is shipbreaking in East Asia (see box).

Policing the PPE market

Workers exposed to asbestos usually use personal protective equipment (PPE). But these may not be effective enough. It depends on the quality of the equipment itself and the actual conditions of use. A Finnish survey of high-performance respiratory protection devices found that only 8 out of 21 appliances tested gave workers proper protection against asbestos fibres².

Most equipment is still laboratory quality-tested, without regard to actual conditions of use. What is needed is an orderly, comprehensive feedback of experience on PPE performance and proper policing of the PPE market. ■



Recent figures bear out the true dangers of asbestos, be it from low-dose occupational exposure, or exposure from environmental or domestic sources. These figures must be an incentive to set occupational exposure limits at the lowest level technically possible and to make an immediate start on a register of all asbestos-contaminated structures.

An analysis of admissions to French hospitals in 1998³ found that 3,500 people were hospitalized for asbestos-related cancers. The survey found that over a third of victims were women. Asbestos-related cancers affect a much wider population than just process plant workers. In twenty or so cases, cancers had developed in people younger than 20.

A Spanish survey on mesotheliomas done between 1993 and 1996 in the provinces of Barcelona and Cadiz found that nearly 40% of mesotheliomas could be attributed to environmental or domestic exposures⁴. This survey forms part of wider European research project covering six regions in three countries (Italy, Switzerland and Spain) on the basis of which the researchers concluded that living within a 2,000 metre radius of an asbestos mine, asbestos-cement plant, asbestos textiles, shipyards or brakes factories increases the risk of mesothelioma twelvefold⁵.

² *Santé et Travail*, No. 32, p. 34.

³ P. Benkimoun, 3,500 people treated for asbestos-related cancers in 1998, *Le Monde*, 29 March 2001.

⁴ A. Agudo *et alii.*, Occupation and Risk of Malignant Pleural Mesothelioma: A Case-Control Study in Spain, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, Vol. 37, pp. 159-168.

⁵ C. Magnani *et alii.*, Multicentric study on malignant pleural mesothelioma and non-occupational exposure to asbestos, *British Journal of Cancer*, No. 83 (2000), pp. 104-111.

Scrapping asbestos-laden hulks

Industrial countries are increasingly shipping their toxic waste off to Third World countries in a trend spurred by the marketable right to destroy the environment. Free-market economists apply the same rationale for buying and selling pollution rights in order to justify the export of toxic wastes to countries "freely willing" to run the risk for cash.

One case which points up how tragically acute this situation is as regards asbestos is shipbreaking in India, Bangladesh, the Philippines and China. The biggest of these scrapping sites is at Alang in the Indian State of Gujarat. Geographical peculiarities which create a huge tidal range between low and high tide in Alang Bay allows ships - including deep-draught ones - to be simply driven onto the beach during full moon high tides, dispensing with the need for proper dry-dock shipbreaking facilities. Between 35,000 and 40,000 workers from poverty-stricken rural communities work on them in inhumane conditions for basic pay of about \$1.5 a day. Working completely unprotected and kept in total ignorance of the dangers involved, these men and women have to strip the structural steel work from the ships for sale on the local market. Work-related accidents are high and hygiene appalling. They do not even have showers in their makeshift lodgings.

Most of the ships built in the 60s and 70s are pack-jam full of asbestos and a host of other toxic substances like arsenic, cadmium, PCBs, etc. Greenpeace estimates that about 700 such vessels are sold each year to brokers for scrapping at these Asian shipbreaking locations. It is common practice among European firms. Amongst others, the Anglo-Dutch shipping line P&O Nedlloyd,

Hamburg Süd (a subsidiary of the German food group Dr Oetker) and a subsidiary of Hapag-Lloyd, have been condemned by Greenpeace for sending asbestos-containing ships to these killer scrapping sites.

Most of these companies are obviously not too embarrassed by their practices to flaunt "environmental charters" and their belief in "corporate social responsibility". The P&O Nedlloyd group has adopted the International Safety Management System for its operations which, as well as marine safety, is also supposed to cover certain environmental protection aspects. In 1995, the head of the Oetker Group, August Oetker, was awarded the title of "Eco-Manager of the Year" by the WWF (World Wide Fund For Nature) and the German magazine *Capital* for his drive to cut waste and promote environmentally-sound production.

Technically, the export of toxic waste from OECD to non- OECD countries has been illegal since 1995 by agreement between the parties to the Basel Convention on the Control of the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes. But the Convention is not being enforced. It is our understanding that the EU has done nothing to halt the scrapping of toxic waste-laden ships in East Asia.

For further details on shipbreaking in Asia, see :

- <http://www.greenpeace.org.au/info/archives/toxic/trade/scrapasia.htm>
- <http://www.zotnet.net/~erunners/e127/scrapping.html>
- http://www.sunspot.net/news/custom/shipbreakers/ndx_en.shtml



Photos by Perry Thorsvik:Sun Staff