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ILO deals the 'death knoll for asbestos', says ITUC

Brussels, 14 September 2010 (ITUC OnLine): A statement from a United Nations body confirming its desire to see the end of asbestos use worldwide is the 'death knoll' for a substance which claims one life every five minutes around the clock, the global union confederation ITUC has said.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) this week warned in an official position statement⁽¹⁾ that industry lobbyists pushing asbestos around the world must not claim to have ILO support.

ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow said the ILO statement provides welcome support for the global union campaign to see a ban on asbestos worldwide and a just transition to safer, better jobs for displaced asbestos workers.

"ILO has confirmed that it wants to see the elimination of asbestos use worldwide, full stop," she said.

"Coming on the heels of calls for a global ban on asbestos use from major scientific⁽²⁾, medical⁽³⁾ and occupational health⁽⁴⁾ groups, this sounds the death knoll for the deadly fibre and a fatal blow for the asbestos pushers."

The ILO statement comes at a time the asbestos industry is pressing hard for an expansion of chrysotile (white) asbestos production and sales. All forms of asbestos except for chrysotile are already prohibited worldwide.

Industry lobby group the Chrysotile Institute, which takes a lead in the global promotion of asbestos exports, routinely cites ILO documents and claims they are supportive of its case for continued asbestos use.

Concerned at the industry's repeated misuse of ILO's name, the Geneva-based body issued the position statement which highlights the UN agency's commitment to "promoting the elimination of the future use of all forms of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials."

The issue has caused renewed controversy in recent months, as the Chrysotile Institute has been trying to secure government and private funds to dramatically expand asbestos production in Quebec, Canada.

Sharan Burrow said the ILO position statement could have "life-saving consequences, in reinforcing the union case for total asbestos ban."

At the ITUC's June 2010 global congress in Vancouver, delegates agreed to press for "a total world ban on the use and commercialisation of asbestos, in which regard Congress, meeting in Canada, makes a special appeal to the Canadian government to join a total world ban on asbestos."⁽⁵⁾

That did not mean consigning asbestos workers to the scrap heap, however. According to Sharan Burrow: "Bringing an end to asbestos use is crucial, but only one part of the equation. That's why ITUC is pursuing a policy of just transition, replacing dirty, damaging and deadly jobs with safer alternatives.

"We don't want to see asbestos workers jobless, we want to see them in good, union jobs that don't kill them. Asbestos is a dying industry – we need to consign it to history and move instead to decent, green jobs where you work, not die, for a living."

Fiona Murie, health and safety director of the global construction union federation BWI, whose members are in the asbestos exposures front line, warned that while the industry profited from asbestos use, workers paid with their lives.

"The World Health Organisation's latest estimate notes that asbestos already claims 107,000 lives a year," ⁽⁶⁾ she said. "Even that conservative estimate means every five minutes around the clock a person dies of asbestos-related disease."

The construction union health and safety expert welcomed the ILO statement. "This confirms what the industry has in reality known all along – ILO, alongside major respectable scientific and medical organisations the world over, opposes the ongoing use of a fibre that kills at least 300 people every day.

“The asbestos industry must now cease and desist its callous and cynical subterfuge on asbestos and should accept no one including the ILO wants its deadly product.”

Notes to editors

1. The ILO position on safety in the use of asbestos, ILO, September 2010 [pdf].
2. Letter from over 100 scientists to Quebec Premier Charest, 28 January 2010 [pdf].
3. Amir Attaran, David R Boyd, and Matthew B Stanbrook. Asbestos mortality: a Canadian export, Canadian Medical Association Journal, volume 179, pages 871-872, 2008.
- Ban production, use and export of asbestos, CMA tells governments, Canadian Medical Association (CMA) news release, 20 July 2010.
- A worn-Out welcome: Renewed call for a global ban on asbestos, Rebecca Clay Haynes, Environmental Health Perspectives, volume, 118, pages a298-a303, online 1 July 2010. doi:10.1289/ehp.118-a298
4. Repeat Call for a Ban on Asbestos, Collegium Ramazzini, 20 April 2010 [pdf].
5. Resolution on extending social protection and ensuring good occupational health and safety, ITUC Congress, Vancouver, 21-25 June 2010 [pdf].
6. Asbestos: elimination of asbestos-related diseases, World Health Organisation (WHO) factsheet No.343, WHO, July 2010.

Further information

For more on the asbestos industry's misuse of ILO's name support its argument for asbestos use, see the ITUC/Hazards green jobs, safe jobs blog.

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