

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC Pledge on Toxics: "If you expose us, we'll expose you"

Brussels, 27 April 2015 (ITUC OnLine): Occupational cancers kill at a rate of more than once a minute worldwide, according to a comprehensive review of the available evidence by the ITUC. The global union body, speaking out ahead of the 28 April International Workers' Memorial Day, says this preventable waste of life must end and has a stern warning for rogue employers: "If you expose us, we'll expose you."

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said, "Even conservative estimates put the annual occupational cancer toll at 660,000 deaths a year. A poisonous cocktail of toxic marketing and regulatory failure has already condemned another generation to an early grave."

"As long as there's money to be made, industry will retain its fatal attachment to some of the most potent killers in history," Burrow notes. "For example, next month it is all but certain that just enough governments will dance to the asbestos industry's tune to keep chrysotile asbestos off the toxic exports list included in a key United Nations treaty."

"This is a typical example of an industry protecting its markets without regard to the human consequences. Global asbestos production is not falling, and in some countries, including India, Indonesia and Brazil, consumption has increased."

Benzene is another industry favourite with over half a century of evidence establishing a clear cancer link. Yet the biggest names in petrochemicals – British Petroleum (BP), Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil and Shell Chemical – all contributed to major study that ran through most of the last decade, designed to head off cancer compensation claims and to protect their valuable product from tighter regulation.

"Wherever stricter controls are proposed, industry representatives or their hired guns appear, challenging the science and predicting an economic catastrophe," Burrow says. "Whether it is silica or diesel exhaust, dyes or metals, or the endocrine-disrupting chemicals linked to breast cancers and reproductive problems, alternatives are not being used and controls are not being employed or adequately enforced."

This year on 28 April, the international campaign day when unions pledge to "remember the dead, and fight for the living", the harm caused by workplace toxins is being put under the spotlight. A new ITUC guide, 'Toxic work – stop deadly exposures today' (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/toxic-work-stop-deadly-exposures>) sets out how to remove toxic exposures from the workplace. At the centre of the union strategy is active, union-supported workforce participation, in finding problems and implementing solutions.

According to Burrow: "There is nothing inevitable about exposure to toxins at work. Over 40 countries, including all those in the European Union, function without asbestos with no negative impacts. Why shouldn't workers in India, Brazil or Sri Lanka be afforded the same protection, the same respect for their health?

"Some of the world's most profitable companies are not just defending their toxic products, they are defending weak exposure standards that mean they profit and you pay. It is not ethical, it is not healthy and it is not what we bargained for. We make this pledge: if they expose us, we will expose them."

1. Statistics are included in a new ITUC-supported workplace cancer website, www.cancerhazards.org, which provides union representatives and others with the latest news on occupational cancer, including emerging scientific evidence and union initiatives to combat occupational causes of cancer.
2. Online campaign resources are available: ITUC occupational health and safety <http://www.ituc-csi.org/OHS> and 28 April activities (<http://28april.org/>) 'Toxic work – stop deadly exposures today' (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/toxic-work-stop-deadly-exposures>)

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