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ITUC Calls for Asbestos Trade Crackdown

Brussels, 13 April 2017 (ITUC OnLine): The ITUC has called for international action to stop the trade in chrysotile asbestos, a toxic form of the mineral which is still being exported, including to developing countries. A key step would be for chrysotile to be included on the list of substances under the Rotterdam Convention on trade in hazardous substances. Trade unions and many governments will be pushing for the listing at the next international Rotterdam Convention conference in Geneva starting on 24 April. Under its current rules, full consensus is required to list a chemical so any single country can block the inclusion of a substance on the list. The ITUC is therefore also backing a proposal from 12 African governments to allow a 75% majority vote when consensus is not possible. A small group of the 157 countries who have ratified the Convention, including Kazakhstan and Russia, both exporters of chrysotile, have been blocking its inclusion on the list. Canada, previously in the blocking camp, announced it would support inclusion in 2012 after its last asbestos mines closed.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said “Asbestos, including chrysotile, is one of the biggest industrial killers of all time. Tens of thousands of people die from it each year, and it is scandalous that more than a hundred million people are still exposed to chrysotile asbestos. Getting it on the Rotterdam list is an important step towards protecting those, especially in developing countries, who are increasingly being exposed to it.”

When a substance is listed under the Rotterdam Convention, countries that export it are subjected to obligations, including through the Prior Informed Consent provision which allows receiving governments to decide if and how a substance can be imported. Many developing countries, where much chrysotile is exported to, want it listed. It has met all the conditions required for listing under the convention. However asbestos companies and a small number of exporting countries, with support of a Quebec-based front organisation called the International Chrysotile Association (ICA), have managed to get the recommendation for listing blocked for a decade. The ICA is notorious for spreading false and misleading information to keep the chrysotile trade afloat.

“This is about protecting workers and the general public, especially in developing countries, by reducing their exposure to a substance that kills. We call on all governments to support the listing of chrysotile, and for a change in the voting rules of the Rotterdam Convention to stop just one or two countries from blocking the listing of these hazardous substances. This change will simply bring the Rotterdam Convention into line with voting rules in other conventions. This would be a major step in encouraging more countries to join the 60 who have already banned chrysotile and ending the deadly trade in chrysotile altogether,” said Burrow.

To sign the LabourStart petition “Stand with Rajendra” that will be presented to the meeting of parties to the Convention on 2nd May, click: https://www.labourstartcampaigns.net/show_campaign.cgi?c=3387

The ITUC represents 181 million workers in 163 countries and territories and has 340 national affiliates.

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