

# **ILO Worker's Group Turns Up The Heat On ILO & WHO To Support A Global Asbestos Ban**

- Geneva, Switzerland - Tuesday 14 June

The Worker's Group at this year's meeting of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva today agreed to prod the World Health Organisation (WHO) and ILO into eventually adopting and promoting a world ban of asbestos. The move comes during the closing days of the ILO's annual meeting, where some 4,000 worker, employer and government representatives from around the world have gathered to discuss occupational health and safety, among other issues.

It also comes after an intensive lobby effort last week by trade unions to have governments join efforts for a world ban of asbestos. The aftermath of a special ceremony by Global Unions at the ILO to kick-off a Global Campaign would now be played out over the next year within targeted countries. Nearly 40 countries have already or soon will ban asbestos, leaving 80 more that still produce or engage in its trade.

The workers' meeting today called on the ILO to integrate 'Just Employment Transition' principles as a central feature of efforts to care for workers displaced by such a ban, especially as it applies to developing countries. A discussion document circulated to trade unions at the ILO and to national affiliates proposes to have a resolution prepared in time for the UN body's annual meeting next year where governments, employers, as well as worker representatives would debate and vote on the asbestos issue.

In the meantime, today's motion called on the ILO to support "the Global Union 'Asbestos Ban' campaign, involving all regions and sectors of the trade union movement". ICFTU General Secretary, Guy Ryder said earlier that efforts must focus on building a stronger consensus for a ban. "We will extend our appeal to employer, trade union and civil society organisations within every country to get involved in the ban, as a matter of urgency and human decency," he said.

## **Health Experts Are Beacons for Change**

At the campaign kick-off last week ILO Executive Director of the Social Protection Sector Assane Diop said that asbestos has caused huge human suffering, incurable diseases, permanent disabilities and over 100,000 deaths per year. "Its wide use in the 60s and 70s has caused a world epidemic which is well-known today in the developed countries and is growing fast in the developing ones".

Jorma Rantanen from the International Congress on Occupational Health (ICOH) confirmed that the evidence showing the dangers of asbestos is irrefutable and that proven alternatives for asbestos exist and are in use. He referred to the kick-off as a historical event, promising his organization's "full commitment to the support of the Campaign with all the means available to the ICOH."

The sentiment was echoed in a written message delivered to the meeting by Dr Ruiz Matus of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA). The President of the ICFTU Sharan Burrow, who chaired the kick-off meeting read out the statement, which emphasized WFPHA's "strong and resolute call for a global ban on the mining and use of asbestos."

## **National Governments Can Inspire Hope**

Almost every speaker at the kick-off meeting emphasized the difficult road that lied ahead, perhaps stretching for some decades into the future. However they equally expressed hope that barriers would be overcome.

Brazil Labour Minister Ricardo Berzoini said that his Government had not yet banned asbestos but had set up an inter-ministerial committee to build the necessary consensus within his country.

Dr. Dirk Steen of Belgium where asbestos was banned some years ago pointed out the hurdles identified by his Government for monitoring the uses of asbestos and for the need to set up proper regulatory and administrative frameworks for doing so.

In a letter delivered to government delegations attending the ILO, Guy Ryder emphasised that countries which already have national bans have a special role to play in promoting a world ban. "You are in a position to work with us and the trade union and employer groups in your country to help convince those governments that still use, produce or trade in asbestos to cease doing so, as a matter of urgent necessity and to start planning a transition process, without delay", he said.

Since asbestos is still present in many countries (including where bans are in effect) Ryder also requested that records of existing stocks be kept by governments and that uses of asbestos within their national borders be monitored and a strategy to eliminate them adopted.

If planned properly, Ryder said that employment impacts of the ban could be offset through positive employment transition. "We believe that an adequate roster of tools and Instruments exists for any country to adequately deal with all aspects of asbestos transition, including the prevention of cancers, handling and banning of asbestos, promoting alternatives, as well as measuring and addressing social, employment and economic impacts," he stated.

The most recent version of country-by-country profiles showing each government's status relative to the asbestos ban issues and related Instruments and Measures is available at: [http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpL\\_6.EN.pdf](http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpL_6.EN.pdf)

## **Trade Unions Step Up To the Plate**

***IFBWW:*** At the kick-off meeting, Anita Normark, the General Secretary of the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers highlighted a recent joint Declaration issued by Global Union Federations and others calling for a world ban and for the ILO to join world efforts for a ban. She also warned against the use of silicon and cautioned against the erroneous promotion of the so-called ‘safe uses’ of asbestos.

***IMF:*** International Metalworkers’ Federation General Secretary Marcello Malentacchi circulated a document published for a recent World Congress meeting of his organization, where a resolution for a world ban was adopted. IMF members from throughout the world signed letters, addressed to their respective governments, urging support for the banning of asbestos.

***LO-Denmark*** took the occasion to show how a national trade union centre can provide leadership. Poul Schoening of LO-Denmark tabled his organizations recently-adopted policy: “Asbestos – In Denmark and at the Global Level”, which is also available at: **[http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpL\\_9.EN.pdf](http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpL_9.EN.pdf)**

Sheoning said that LO-Denmark supports the ICFTU Global Asbestos Campaign and had devised a national plan of action that might serve as a model for trade unions in other countries to commence actions on asbestos. The document contains an overview of asbestos uses in Denmark and points out how a national campaign could contribute to international efforts. Observers remarked on the value of ***a new table*** contained in the Danish report that could serve as an initial workplace check-off list to identify where asbestos still exists at the production level.

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