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**Snapshot of Current Asbestos Use in India**

**A**sbestos – the so-called *magic mineral* of yesteryears – was single handedly responsible for thousands of industrial deaths in the 20th century and is continuing to take its toll, even in countries that have completely stopped its use, such as Australia. Realizing the dangers, more than 40 industrialized countries introduced bans on its production and usage. With dwindling markets in developed countries, the global asbestos industry is focusing on emerging markets such as India where weak legislation and few occupational health safeguards provide ideal conditions for the expansion of the asbestos sector.

The Indian economy is growing in all spheres with a GDP growth of about 8.7% for the financial year 2007-08.<sup>1</sup> The construction industry is thriving needing to cater for a billion plus population, it is very large employing 31 million people and is second only to agriculture in terms of employment; it contributes 20% of GDP.<sup>2</sup> In India, the vast majority of asbestos products (nearly 80%) are used for rural low-cost housing, schools and industrial structures in India.<sup>3</sup> Asbestos-cement production increased from 0.68 million tons in 1993-1994 to 1.38 million tonnes in 2002-2003.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, asbestos consumption in India was in the region of 280,000 tonnes making it Asia’s second largest user, after China. Direct and indirect employment in asbestos-related industries and mines is around 100,000 workers (*Ramanathan and Subramanian, 2001*).

**Risking Workers’ Lives for Profits**

Workers employed in the asbestos processing sector are ignorant of their ill-fated future. The same goes for the millions of construction workers who may be exposed during maintenance, renovation and demolition activities in buildings that contain asbestos. Many of these workers are in the unorganized sector and lack any awareness of the risks they are facing. Due to the lack of a sophisticated data collection system, it has been difficult to quantify the current incidence of asbestosis, mesothelioma and other asbestos-related illness in India or to make accurate epidemiological predictions. Researchers at the National Institute of Occupational Health and other institutions have reported numerous instances of high levels of occupational exposure to asbestos, indicating the potential for a future epidemic of asbestos-related diseases in India.

**Trade Union Participation in the Global Ban Asbestos Campaign**

The Building and Wood Workers International<sup>5</sup> (BWI) has long been instrumental in voicing the concerns of workers in its trade sectors globally and in 1989 called for a global ban on asbestos at its congress. Since then, the BWI has played a prominent role in the global ban asbestos campaign and worked closely with stakeholders from asbestos victims’ groups and civil society to mount high-profile ac-

tivities such as Global Asbestos Congresses in Brazil (2000) and Japan (2004), and the Asian Asbestos Conference in Thailand (2006). BWI officials have engaged in continuous dialogue on asbestos with the ILO, the WHO and other key stakeholders; in June 2006, BWI-led efforts were prominent at the International Labour Conference in Geneva, where a resolution was adopted for the elimination of all further uses of asbestos globally. At the same time, the ILO publicly clarified the meaning of ILO Convention 162 on Safety in the Use of Asbestos, stating that it does not provide justification and/or endorsement of the continued use of asbestos. Inspired by the ILO, in 2006 the WHO also announced its much-awaited affirmative policy calling for the elimination of asbestos-related diseases worldwide.

The BWI has developed a global action plan on asbestos and has involved its affiliates in raising awareness of the asbestos hazard amongst members and lobbying for national bans on the usage of all forms of asbestos. In India, the BWI has 29 affiliated unions, many of which are organizing construction workers. In the southern state of Tamil Nadu, the BWI has seven affiliates, which have joined hands to form an umbrella federation – the Tamil Nadu Construction and Unorganized Workers’ Federation (TCWF). High on the agenda of this federation is the need to strengthen action on banning asbestos. At a recent federation workshop an unusual step was taken when a producer of non-asbestos roofing material was invited to make a presentation, which underlined the availability of safer and affordable alternatives in India. In Tamil Nadu state, the unions continue to focus their attention on asbestos-manufacturing units to establish contact with at-risk workers and victims’ associations. Based on the success in Tamil Nadu, similar trade union led initiatives could be replicated in other states. Organization of workers on this scale could eventually lead to a nationwide asbestos ban.

**Key Action Areas in India**

In a country of over a billion people with the majority of workers, many of whom are illiterate, belonging to the unorganized sector, raising awareness of invisible workplace hazards such as asbestos is not an easy task. People can visualize injuries from ladder falls and the collapse of scaffolding but explaining that an unseen fiber can cause a fatal disease in the far distant future is a very hard sell. Nevertheless, workers must be made aware of the asbestos hazard; they have a right-to-know how little their employers and Government value their lives. A strategy has been designed to bring home this message which employs a variety of resources and media, including: organization of mass asbestos awareness campaigns for workers and the public as part of activities held on International Workers Memorial Day (April 28); the identification of manufacturers producing safer alternatives in the construction sector and their

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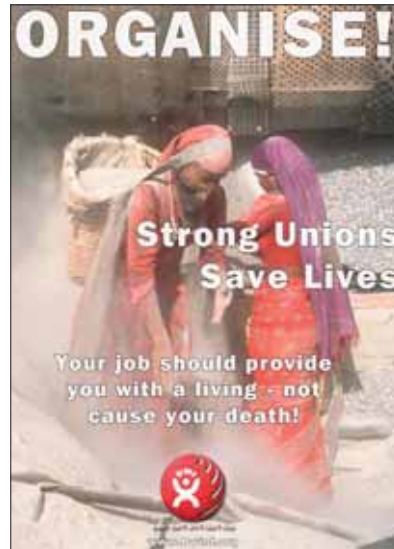
involvement in trade union led asbestos campaigns; exposing the leadership role played by the Canadian Government in the global asbestos lobby. Examples of recent union activities include efforts centered on April 28, 2008 such as:

- ◆ A letter-writing campaign by the Tamil Nadu Construction and Unorganized Workers Federation (TCWF) and Delhi Asangathit Nirman Mazdoor Union (DANMU – Delhi State Construction Workers’ Union) to draw the attention of the Indian Government and the national media to the need for a national asbestos ban.
- ◆ A joint interactive session with the Cancer Institute at Chennai by TCWF personnel with members of the Indian National Rural Labor Federation, Tamil Nadu.
- ◆ Worksite meetings in several locales in Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Gujarat and Kerala to raise members’ awareness of Occupational and Safety Health issues including asbestos; these activities culminated with candle lighting and commemoration ceremonies.

Throughout the year, BWI affiliates in India engage in capacity building among members which includes activities to raise awareness of the health effects of asbestos, the existence of asbestos-free products, the need for periodic health check-ups for at-risk workers, the feasibility of converting to safer industrial technologies and the failure of the Indian Government to implement ILO and WHO asbestos policies. Wherever ban asbestos campaigns have been pursued vigorously by BWI affiliates in India there have been positive results. While Ramamurthy Karnan, General Secretary of the TCWF, is rightly proud that “the regional trade unions have started to do their bit,” he urges “a more concerted effort from the national trade union centers to strengthen the trade union campaign to ban asbestos in India in the coming years.” Trade unions need to make common cause with other social actors if we are to build a truly national campaign to ban asbestos; these include: asbestos victims, environmentalists, academics, industry representatives, medical and legal professionals.

### Conclusion

Sadly, while most industrialized countries have banned the use of asbestos, India’s consumption is increasing. That more and more of this toxin is being incorporated into our society when safer alternatives are available is scandalous; asbestos use can only flourish when elected officials and civil servants tasked with protecting occupational and public health turn a blind eye to the consequences. In India, the asbestos industry is strong but history is full of revolution. A people’s movement can definitely bring about a change for the better. Trade unions working in partnership with like-minded organizations need to step up their pressure on the Government of India to implement a national ban in order to save the lives of millions of workers as well as members of the public.



கூடுதல் வந்துள்ளது. மெசோதீலியோமாவின் முக்கிய அறிகுறியாகவும், மரண உறுப்புகளுக்கு பரவும் குறைந்த அளவில் ஆஸ்பெஸ்டாஸ்டன் தொடர்பு ஏற்படுவதால் ஆஸ்பெஸ்டாஸ்டன் தொடர்புள்ள நோயினால் தாக்கப்படுபவர்களில் சிலவே இதனைப் பெறுகின்றனர். மெசோதீலியோமாவை நோய் மறைந்திருக்கும் காலமானது பொதுவாக முயற்சி முதல் இரண்டு ஆண்டுகள் வரை இருக்கக்கூடும் என்றாலும், பீரிட்டின் நீடி மன்றங்கள், நோய் மறைந்திருக்கும் காலத்தை மிகக் குறைந்த காலமான பத்து ஆண்டுகளாக ஒப்புக் கொண்டுள்ளனர். நோய் கண்டறியப்பட்டபின் மெசோதீலியோமாவை நோயாளிகள் சராரியாக பதினெட்டு மாதங்கள் முதல் இரண்டு ஆண்டுகள் வரை உயிர்வாழக்கூடுமென்றாலும், சிலர் இன்னும் அதிக காலம் உயிர்வாழவும் வாய்ப்புண்டு. தற்போது இதை குணப்படுத்தக்கூடிய, அறியப்பட்டுள்ள சிகிச்சைமுறை

