

Extra-Congress Submission

15.1 GLOBALISATION FROM BELOW: BUILDING AN ANTI-ASBESTOS MOVEMENT IN BRAZIL

FERNANDA GIANNASI

Full Portuguese Text

Abstract

This paper describes the battle between the asbestos industry and the anti-asbestos campaign in Brazil. It shows how the industry has justified the so-called “controlled use” of asbestos by propagating a series of myths to try and convince the public that asbestos is safe (e.g. chrysotile is not as dangerous as other types of asbestos; Brazilian chrysotile is purer than foreign chrysotile; Brazilian companies use asbestos in a responsible manner; exposure can be adequately controlled through engineering controls and industrial hygiene measures; substitutes are too expensive and just as dangerous; asbestos products are especially important for poor people in third world countries; asbestos-related diseases are rare in Brazil; an asbestos ban would create unemployment; etc.). The author demolishes all these myths with reference to international research findings and her own detailed knowledge and experience of the real situation in Brazil.

The author uses case studies to show how Brazilian workers organised themselves to fight for an asbestos ban and to gain recognition of their predicament as asbestos victims. Controversy around the closure of the Eternit (now the St. Gobain subsidiary, Eterbras) factory in Osasco, São Paulo in 1993 fed growing concern among workers about the effects of asbestos exposure on their health. They began to contact former colleagues and discovered that many were suffering from respiratory problems. Medical examinations revealed an epidemic of asbestos related disease. They linked up with workers at the Thermoid brakes factory, also in São Paulo, to form the Brazilian Association of People Exposed to Asbestos (ABREA) in 1995. ABREA has sought compensation for its members while raising the issue at a national and international level, culminating in the international conference in Osasco in September 2000.

The author relates the development of the anti-asbestos campaign to the recent emergence of a wave of new international social movements that “think locally and act globally”. These new non-hierarchical campaigns have democratised policy development and promoted broad participation of a new generation of activists by using new information and communications technology to exchange ideas, information and proposals. They have also managed to mobilise large numbers of people in non-violent direct action against the governments, institutions and transnational corporations that are bent on building a socially exclusive neoliberal world order (Seattle etc.).

Abstract compiled by Chris Whitehouse.