

# Reports

## 16.2 CONGRESS REPORT

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The conference was a huge success with over 300 in attendance and more than 30 international delegations. It will serve as a catalyst for future action on all aspects of asbestos and in particular for the world-wide ban yet to be achieved. Prior to the 3-day conference we were given a tour of Negritude Familia, a social project that aims to promote the rights of children and teenagers. The organisation is supported by Brazil's most popular band of the same name. During the conference we were entertained by the band and the young peoples' own drama and dance band "100% COHAB". The organisation has become internationally known as a model for helping young people achieve their aspirations using their unbridled energy.

The conference was held in Osasco, approximately 20 miles from where we were staying in Sao Paulo. Osasco, until recently, was the centre of Brazil's asbestos manufacturing industry; asbestos is still widely used in Brazil, mainly in construction materials. We were shown one retail outlet with tons of asbestos roofing sheet not 5 miles from the conference owned by a subsidiary of Eternit, one of the world's largest asbestos producers.

Many speakers from victims support groups, the legal profession, academics, together with medical and occupational health specialists attended. I made new global links while reinforcing old ones.

The countries represented included Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Slovenia, Ireland, Chile Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Holland, Japan, China, USA, The Virgin Islands, Finland, Italy, France, Korea, Malaysia, Belgium.

The conference organisers are making available a CD and videos in order that you may capture some of the enthusiasm experienced by all the delegates while serving as a permanent record of the latest developments in the field of asbestos and all its related issues. Copies will be available in the near future.

Laurie Kazan-Allen, Editor of the British Asbestos Newsletter and one of the driving forces in organising the conference, said it was the first time victims, academics and all those involved in the asbestos issue had come together globally to discuss, and more importantly take action on, this scourge in society. Fernanda Giannasi, an Environmental Health Inspector for the Osasco Area also made several in-depth contributions throughout the course of the conference. Local officials brought criminal charges against her for doing her job while inspecting local asbestos factories. She was subsequently found not guilty. The treatment meted out to Fernanda is by no means an exception in many countries. Many speakers, including the local victims support group, paid homage to Fernanda for her unrelenting fight for peoples' rights in general and those of workers in particular. She was instrumental in bringing the conference to Osasco and received standing ovations on the many occasions that she spoke.

There were many contributions made from both Victims Support Groups, Academics, and specialists in the field.

Armand Pereira, Director of the Brazilian ILO office set the scene by reporting that the estimated 100,000 deaths per year due to asbestos were a significant part of the 1,000,000 work related deaths globally.

The Poster Exhibition in the foyer of the conference gave a grim reminder in very graphic terms of the human misery asbestos has visited upon the world, the purveyors of which having made huge profits at the expense of innocent working people. Many of the photographs showed the appalling working conditions in South Africa and the results in human terms were all too visible on the faces and bodies of those who's only fault was to trust British asbestos mine owners when they said their jobs were safe to do. The Merseyside Victims Support Group displayed a survey of 7 countries welfare benefit schemes for mesothelioma sufferers. The paper showed a great disparity of how the various countries treated the terminally ill (see papers in [Section 14.8](#)). The group also distributed a Smoking Cessation Paper drafted by Ms. Julie Hotchkiss of Wirral Health Authority, Merseyside, UK. The latter paper is aimed at people who have been exposed to asbestos and therefore have a 7 to 9 fold increased risk of developing an asbestos related lung cancer. The scheme is likely to be adopted nationally if the pilot project is a success.

### **Trade Union Workshop**

Probably the most important decisions made at the conference were taken in the Trade Union Workshop in drawing up an action plan to ban asbestos. Nigel Bryson of the GMB was prominent in this exercise together with Rory O'Neill, Editor of Hazards and Fiona Murie from the International Federation of Building Workers and Woodworkers. Over 60 delegates from 20 countries, representing Brazilian construction workers, Canadian autoworkers and many more, attended the 3-hour workshop session. It was a classic example of how trade unionists can network internationally in order that real goals can be achieved. General Secretaries of unions discussed with rank and file members practical solutions to this major problem. One measure agreed was to ensure "Just Transition." Where workers may be displaced because of the introduction of an asbestos ban, trade unions should lobby for a Just Transition to protect the income, employment and welfare of those affected and their communities.

The workshop discussion broadened into the wider economic repercussions of a ban and how, as trade unionists, we should deal with the lack of investment by short-sighted company boards thinking only of the next shareholders' meeting. The way forward was forcefully argued by Rory O'Neill and many other trade union speakers: that investment was the answer to regenerate new growth where old industries like asbestos were coming to an end. Successful models of this were cited such as the GI Bill that required vast investment and paid off 5-fold. The German state of North Rhine Westphalia took the same pragmatic approach between 1984 and 1994 when it lost over 700,000 jobs in traditional industries but through a regeneration programme

created over 800,000 in environmental and service industries, a net gain in employment.

This approach would not be popular in the boardroom and this is why trade unions and society in general needed to demand of our politicians that there is an alternative to promoting a human scrap heap. Nerve and courage will be required by governments to implement the alternative strategy outlined at the conference.

## **USA**

Jim Fite of the White Lung Association told us of the organisations success when they appealed to the wider community on the asbestos issue, citing the dangers of asbestos in schools. An American lawyer suggested we do as his law firm did and promote new legislation in countries with inadequate laws to safeguard people's rights. Little discussion took place on the Ashcroft Hyde Bill designed to limit civil compensation claims in the USA. This was defeated only to be replaced by a more innocuous bill that would compensate asbestos companies using taxpayers money! Both Presidential candidates support the measures limiting compensation in this way. An ominous message of what may be in store for other victim's world-wide.

The USA still has to introduce a ban after the government's attempt in 1989 to rid the country of this killer dust was overturned by the courts.

## **UK**

Mavis Robinson, Macmillan Nurse from Leeds, gave a report on the latest developments in palliative care for mesothelioma sufferers. Mavis spoke about a unique UK Mesothelioma Nursing and Information project. The project is funded until May 2001 by Macmillan Cancer Relief and provides:

- a) an information line for patients and carers and health professionals on the subject of malignant mesothelioma;
- b) an (expanding) network of nurses with specialized training.

Previous rarity of this disease has led to a lack of knowledge amongst many health professionals and as a consequence of this patients find it difficult to obtain information. The increasing number of mesothelioma sufferers has prompted the funding for this project. The telephone line was established in July 99 and operates for two days per week. In the first year since its establishment 518 calls have been received, of these 203 were from patients and carers and 315 from professionals. Most patients and carers wanted much more detailed clinical information than had been given to them. 204 of the professional calls were from nurses requesting information to help their patients.

With respect to the other purpose of the project - to establish a network of specialist lung cancer nurses – 34 specialist nurses have now been enrolled and have attended training days. They are all committed to teaching other nurses about the disease and to improving future care. Most major centres are represented in this network. In the future, if funding allows, material is also going to be prepared to direct health staff to sources of support and information for these patients.

Dr. Gurnam Basran, a Chest Consultant from Rotherham General Hospital brought the conference up to date on the latest medical information available on asbestos related and pleural lung diseases. He stated that a review paper is being prepared by the British Thoracic Society on the diagnosis and management of mesothelioma. It is hoped that this will provide a “guideline” on the subject and will be used by chest consultants in the UK and probably abroad.

## **Japan**

Mr. Sugio Furuya, Secretary General of BANJAN, the Japanese pressure group on asbestos, reported that there had only been 7 cases litigated in Japan; of which 6 had reached out-of-court settlements. Japan is the world's biggest importer of asbestos with over 117,000 tons imported during 1999.

## **Australia**

Ella Sweeney, Secretary of the Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia and a victim herself said one in every three houses in Australia built before 1982 will have asbestos in them.

New South Wales has the highest rate of asbestos disease in Australia as a result of manufacturing, building, construction and refinery processes that have occurred in the State over many years. The number of people diagnosed with mesothelioma and other asbestos related conditions has been rising every year and is not expected to peak until 2020.

During the next ten years, there will be over 6,000 new cases of mesothelioma. Asbestos related lung cancer is at least twice as common as mesothelioma, indicating that we can expect 12,000 new cases by 2010. Ella asked the conference to think about these figures: 18,000 cases of incurable cancer, caused by asbestos, over the next 10 years.

The Asbestos Diseases Society of NSW was formed on 15 May 1990. It is now called the Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia. The Foundation is made up of victims of asbestos diseases and their families, friends and other interested persons who seek to support and assist. The group includes many widows who have borne the brunt of asbestos diseases through the loss of their husbands.

The Foundation's aim is to be available and accessible to victims of asbestos-related diseases and their families, and to make a significant contribution to the awareness and understanding of the dangers of asbestos in the community and consequently to help reduce the number of victims in the future.

Each November, the Foundation organises a National Asbestos Awareness Day. In recent years this has expanded into a National Asbestos Awareness Week. The Foundation receives a grant which allows for the employment of a full-time counsellor. Enough funds are raised to pay for a secretary three days a week and for a (very) part-time campaigner. It publishes a monthly Newsletter which provides members with current news and views.

In 1997, the Foundation played an important role in winning some of the most far-reaching legislation ever enacted in Australia on behalf of victims. The new law provides real justice and creates a fast and efficient system that eliminates death-bed hearings. It was bitterly opposed by the asbestos industry and insurers. An enormous campaign was run by James Hardie, CSR, the insurance industry and employers' groups against the proposals. However, the Foundation was able to successfully lobby the NSW Parliament so the legislation was passed without amendment.

A campaign is currently underway to get the first Asbestos Diseases Research Institute established. If the Institute is set up, its work will include developing research into the incidence of asbestos related diseases, screening groups of people who are at risk, improving diagnosis, and looking for better treatments for asbestos, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Asbestos mining is now banned in Australia but this does not mean the problems are over. There is still asbestos in the community. As just one example, there was a major scare reported in the Sydney Morning Herald on September 29 this year, with pieces of asbestos being blown about in the wind on a Zetland building site less than five kilometres from the CBD in the middle of the Olympic Games. Australia annually imports 1,500 tonnes of raw asbestos and about one million asbestos-containing products.

Ella concluded by citing another problem that concerns the Foundation; asbestos contamination in East Timor. Many of the homes and other buildings destroyed by the Indonesian forces and militia bands after the East Timorese voted for independence had asbestos in them.

## **Brazil**

The conference endorsed a call by ABREA the Brazilian victim support group for special pension rights, recognition of pleural plaques as an occupational disease, accident benefit (the current system states the condition does not affect a person's capability to work) and a complete review of the present legal framework.

## **South Africa**

Thabo Makweya, a Minister in the Northern Cape Parliament gave a detailed report on the present situation in his country. He said there had been 42 asbestos mines in his area alone and the legacy they had left in human terms was incalculable. Richard Meeran, a solicitor from the UK who's firm had fought for the right to have South African miners' claims put through the British Courts explained the jubilation when the House of Lords overturned an earlier decision to have the cases heard in South Africa. He said the representation to the Court on behalf of the miners by the South African government was a pivotal decision in the case.

## **Italy**

The Mayor of Casale Monferrato reported that there had been 500 deaths in his town and that two thirds of the population had been affected (directly and indirectly) by

asbestos related disease. The largest asbestos manufacturing complex in Italy has now closed and work has started on the demolition and conversion of the site.

What the conference identified above all else was the similarity of problems faced by people around the world. The banning of asbestos is really only the start of eradicating the world of this major killer in our global society.

The winning of the hearts and minds of people in asbestos producing countries and those still using it (as we did in the UK, predominantly between 1930 and the 1970s), is still a long way off. Perhaps we should have "Alice a Fight For Life," the 1982 Yorkshire TV documentary which alerted at least some people in Britain to the asbestos holocaust, shown world-wide. Its message is still a grim reminder of what follows working with asbestos.

We do have a very hard struggle ahead of us in fighting for a global ban on the use of asbestos. It can be done, given the amount of support from all sectors of society displayed at the conference. It will of course always be up to people like us to do something about it. Someone once said nothing gets done in life unless men are prepared to die for it. Surely enough lives have been lost for us to ban asbestos.