

Plenary Presentation

3.5 VERTENZA AMIANTO – ASSOCIAZIONE FAMILIARE VITTIME AMIANTO, CASALE MONFERRATO

BRUNO PESCE

Coordinator

First of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this congress, an event which is very important for Brazil and for the world. My special thanks go to Fernanda Giannasi, a true and real “Passionaria” in the difficult battle against asbestos here in Brazil, which has intensified in recent years.

My presence today is to provide information about the exigencies and the needs I have identified, thanks to my direct experience with workers, trade unions, citizens and relatives of victims – all involved in the asbestos problem.

Casale Monferrato, a small town with 37 thousand inhabitants, illustrates the urgency and gravity of this problem in registering dramatic figures: hundreds of victims among ex-Eternit workers and hundreds more among the general population; 30 cases per year have been registered lately. Unfortunately, especially for “mesothelioma,” a further dramatic incidence is foreseen in the next 20 years, because of the latent period between exposure to the risk and the onset of illness.

In Italy, opposition to asbestos has grown in response to drastic situations, such as those in Casale and Osasco. Nowadays, the asbestos risk in Casale is, fortunately, not comparable with the ravages of the Sixties and Seventies, when there were more than 2 thousand asbestos workers there, large-scale manufacturing having started in 1906 when there were no measures to limit and contain dust inside and outside the factories.

During these last twenty years of fighting, there have been positive results as well as delusions, difficulties and misunderstandings, among the workers themselves and in public opinion. In past years, the dominant culture had a negative role, as it considered the world of work and its needs as something society was not concerned with.

Consequently, this class-oriented culture kept other social strata and the Institutions themselves far from the problems connected to the world of work. It was recognized that a worker, in particular a factory worker, might catch an occupational illness (in Casale the first case of asbestosis was identified in 1947), but not that he could be condemned to death by his job.

The first fundamental and positive change was that sections of the medical profession, basing their action on scientific research, joined the fight against asbestos. Nevertheless, the economic interests of those dealing with the mining and the working of asbestos, in particular the multinationals, are strong and widespread: they have been and still are powerful and influential.

The strongest contradiction, and consequence of putting a ban on asbestos as a raw material, is represented by the conflict between the defence of one’s job and one’s health. In Italy, Law 257/92 decrees a halt to mining and also the conversion of

relevant manufacturing sectors – such as those involving fibrocement, friction products, fireproof and insulating materials, etc – to the use of non-asbestos technology.

This campaign has shown that it is possible to solve the contradiction, avoiding prejudicial positions, simplifications and the contraposition of aims (work on the one hand and health on the other).

Since 1980, in Casale a strong movement has been involved in the fight and, despite the fact that in 1986 there were 350 unemployed ex-Eternit workers, there has been a unification of the two aims: the primary and general defence of health and labour protection.

Providing a united front is fundamental, but other important steps are: recognition of the serious damage caused by working asbestos, product conversion, labour and health protection, and reclamation of contaminated areas.

Eternit's collapse (in Italy there were 4 factories) in 1986 – a collapse decided by the Swiss multinational – meant that proposals to convert its plants in Italy were not feasible.

However, a few months after the collapse, Eternit France (Safe) applied to re-open a “plate” department in Casale, offering employment to a few workers.

Casale's CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), along with environmentalists, was the first to oppose the re-opening: Eternit tried to deny its past responsibilities and to start asbestos-work again, by claiming that asbestos could be worked in full safety; even today, the Canadians declare that this can and should be done.

Such an attempt was made in order to weaken the tough opposition to asbestos, which is a fight for humanity and justice. The Municipality of Casale also opposed the move and Eternit France was obliged to give up.

After the important meeting “No to Asbestos”, which took place in February 1989 in Casale, a dialogue was established with the Italian Parliament, through CGIL, CISL, UIL – national Italian (trade) unions – promoting local activities and organizing protests and sit-ins in Rome at the Italian government's centre of power. The local authorities' contribution was remarkable: for example, the ordinances against asbestos issued by the Municipality of Casale.

This is the reason why Law 257/92, despite containing some inaccuracies and omissions, has allowed our country to be in the fore-front for the non-use of asbestos and environmental rehabilitation: hence the prohibition on mining and working with or promoting asbestos; conversion, reclamation, labour protection and social security policies.

Here in Brazil, as well as in many other countries, promoting protection for workers and citizens has been and still is very difficult: discussing and questioning asbestos issues means putting oneself at risk. The necessity of promoting international intervention has therefore been highlighted both by Italy and Europe. Under international pressure, the European Economic Community (EEC), has fixed 1st January 2005 as the date by which a final decision on the definite ban of asbestos will be taken.

Fortunately, the belief, proved by epidemiological research, that asbestos cannot be used safely without any risk, is spreading more and more. Even supposing asbestos could be extracted and worked in safe conditions, neither the environment nor people dealing with manufactured asbestos products would share such safeguards; these products would accumulate still further in land and buildings, increasing dramatically the risks we already know.

Some aspects have to be taken into consideration.

Epidemiological inquiries, concerning the above-mentioned illnesses, might have underestimated the real situation, when these same inquiries have not been preceded by accurate procedures to identify specific pathologies: occupational diseases declared, medical and legal cases, effective and precise diagnostic tests. It is essential to assert the full rights of the workers, above all the legitimate safeguarding of their health. Working conditions and places have to be constantly checked through a medical system at the disposal of every citizen, designed to favour prevention and able to provide regular and effective monitoring.

In Casale, the fierce opposition to asbestos had the following chronology. Between 1981 and 1983, thanks to the local union's initiative, there were a countless number of appeals to the court, in order to verify the seriousness of asbestos risk (denied by Eternit) inside the factory departments. From 1983 to 1986, only after asking insistently, epidemiological research was carried out – among workers, workers' wives and the general population (see B.Terracini's report). In 1987, INAIL – National Board for the Insurance against Accidents on Industrial Work – acknowledged for the first time the truth about mesothelioma (even when not preceded by asbestosis). In 1985, the local prosecuting magistrates began investigating deaths and responsibilities, but criminal trials, and the consequent series of sentences, took place only in 1993!

The slowness of our judicial system, not only due to shortage of staff, obliged us to mobilize at a local and national level, in order to get to trial. Meanwhile there were setbacks... so in 1987 the “Associazione Familiari Vittime Amianto” (Association of Asbestos Victims' Relatives) was founded, when committees to sue for damages were constituted. Such actions, along with inquiries on biological damage – inquiries made by the Court of Genoa, reached 1700 cases among workers with occupational diseases and dead workers' relatives – succeeded in getting poor compensation but at least each rightful claimant had it.

Many relatives see in the measures we continue to promote – measures aimed at recognition of the serious damage that has occurred and at reclaiming the environment – strong and unifying causes for civil involvement.

In Italy, there was formerly no policy in favour of victims, in particular where environmental crimes were concerned. This is true for people who have suffered the consequences of “passive “ risks, i.e. those who were not employed in asbestos-working factories.

Eventually, last year during the important “National Convention on Asbestos” in Rome – the occasion for all Institutions to check the application of Law 257/92 – Italy's government committed itself to create a national fund for the victims of Asbestos.

A few words about reclamation: the Municipality of Casale played an active and decisive role in offering back-up measures to citizens, which have recently been provided for inhabitants of nearby areas and towns, and by promoting and funding in 1997, the “Territorial Project of Reclamation.” The accomplishment of the reclamation program in Casale, has reached the final phase with respect to public buildings which are the responsibility of the Municipality – substituting the coverings of schools, kindergartens, and so on.

On the right side of the River Po, the reclamation of debris from asbestos cement has been accomplished.

A special dump will soon be opened to contain asbestos cement materials, and citizens will be allowed to throw such materials into the dump freely. Another project is a “Centro Pilota” to make asbestos inert .

The reclamation of the ex-Eternit factories is commencing right now, after a two year delay. There has been a judicial inquiry (because of legal quibbles) demanded by the company placed second in the bidding for the contract.

The Law 426, promulgated on 9th December, 1998, provides for new funds both for the reclamation of sites at high environmental risk and for the citizens’ health.

Surely the Casale reclamation project is a model of how to achieve the aim of “a town without asbestos”, by unifying public and private roles, in a common interest.

Citizens, ex-workers, and workforces in this field have the right to be systematically and periodically informed. Unfortunately however, when concrete policies of intervention are missing, silence will be the likely result.

In particular, the citizen who has to deal with materials containing asbestos needs to know which is the right office from which to get the information and support he requires, in order to act correctly. He must be offered the chance of avoiding doubtful procedures that might be practised by companies called in to handle the problem. It is clear that, where a citizen has been given incomplete answers, as often happens, he will act wrongly, risking his own health and that of others.

Exactly because it is a matter of public health, it is necessary to provide citizens with support, to consider the building of specially provided dumps in each area, and establish conventions for a specific system of transport and disposal.

Further national measures are necessary, in particular concerning tax allowances for costs sustained .

As an association of victims' relatives, we too think that more effective and closer international coordination is essential in order to establish and enforce the civil and financial liabilities of asbestos multinationals (see South Africa).

There are other kinds of problems, of course.

It will be necessary to concentrate our efforts on countries which are still extracting and using asbestos, to lead them towards change. In this sense I don’t know exactly what activities the W.H.O. (World Health Organization) is engaged in.

However, I feel obliged, partly due to my experience in Casale, to underline some medical aspects: it is time to re-train medical practitioners – and not only in areas which have been more involved in the asbestos problem – to optimize interventions to treat pathologies caused by asbestos. In particular, to improve diagnosis, treatment, monitoring of the victims, clinical and biological research, through national and

international cooperation and collaboration. During these last years there has been much progress in this direction.

We are satisfied with the positive results of the fight against asbestos attained in some nations. Here in Brazil, the same movement which has organized this congress, along with the Government, and in particular the trade unions, more and more involved and conscious of the problem, have already achieved a series of results superior to what was considered possible some time ago, when a delegation was invited here by the trade unions.

We are sure that it is worth fighting for civilized goals, not only to inspire hope but also to achieve eventual victory.