

# Role of Trade Unions in the Campaign for Prohibition of Asbestos

**Madhukar Kashinath Pandhe**

*President, Centre for Indian Trade Unions, India*

## **Abstract:**

*Despite adoption of the ILO convention No. 162 the progress in the direction of banning and marketing of asbestos and asbestos containing material has been slow in the world, particularly in developing countries.*

*Global asbestos stakeholders distribute propaganda claiming that asbestos can be used safely under “controlled conditions;” unfortunately, the confusion and misinformation spread by asbestos industry spokespeople has persuaded policy makers and consumers in some developing countries to increase their use of asbestos. By lowering import duties on asbestos, the Indian Government has favored an increase in national asbestos consumption. The role of trade unions in the campaign for a global ban is examined with a particular focus on action taken and demands made by Indian trade unions.*

## **“There is no such thing as safe asbestos” – brochure published by ICEM.**

Despite adoption of the ILO Convention No.162, progress in the direction of banning the use and marketing of asbestos and asbestos-containing material has been slow, particularly in the developing countries.

A powerful asbestos lobby conducting a worldwide misinformation campaign and asbestos manufacturers are having an impact, even on policy makers in some countries. This is causing some confusion among the public due to lack of adequate information on the dangerous consequences of using this dreaded material.

The campaign materials periodically released by the Asbestos Information Centre in India have been frequently trotting out the following arguments:

- No studies have demonstrated or even suggested that high density and non-friable chrysotile-containing products are a real risk to public health.
- Almost all cases of asbestosis, lung cancer, or mesothelioma were caused by use of amphiboles and work practices of 20 to 40 years ago, which have long been abandoned;

- The responsible and controlled use of chrysotile does not entail unacceptable risk.

The asbestos lobby has close allies in governmental circles. As a result of this, even after bans on asbestos by many countries, the Government of India has drastically reduced custom duty on imported asbestos and facilitated its entry into the Indian market without any hindrance.

In the present socio-economic situation in India, trade unions will encounter several problems in the campaign for banning asbestos. With unemployment in the country reaching the alarming level of 150 million persons, there is a growing tendency among the workers to ignore the risk to health and life when they are offered a source of livelihood, however dangerous it may be.

The employers take advantage of the ignorance among the workers of the dangerous consequences of the use of amosite, chrysotile, crocidolite, tremolite, actinolite, and anthrophyllite. Non-implementation of the ILO Convention on asbestos in India has resulted in a lack of adequate protection for those working in the industry.

The trade union movement has not played its required role in protecting the interest of the workers. As a matter of fact, a small section even oppose the ban on asbestos in the country.

ICEM, an International TU Organisation of Chemical, Energy and Mining Unions, in a meeting of participants from asbestos and man-made mineral and vitreous fibres producing, processing and user countries that have banned the marketing of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials and countries seeking to limit asbestos exposure, agreed on:

- the need for all ILO member countries to ratify ILO Convention No.162;
- a call to the workers' group in ILO Governing Body to initiate a country-by-country progress review of ratification and problems encountered;
- the need to develop a coherent materials evaluation system to facilitate substitution based on principles of health protection for workers and the public;
- the pressing need to set up institution to help workers negotiate industrial restructuring and environmental groups.

The participants in the meeting further recommended:

- a) Widening the scope of the ILO Conventions on carcinogens and man-made mineral fibres.
- b) Setting occupational exposure limits for mineral fibres
- c) That the ILO should draw up and adopt a code of practice on insulating fibres (the most common fibre product).

No country-by-country progress review of the use of asbestos was made by the International Labour Organization (ILO). As a result, detailed studies for all the countries are not available. Though ILO admits that about a hundred thousand workers die every year due to this silent killer

the grim realities in various developing countries are still kept under the carpet. The producers of asbestos who are striving to get markets for their product find it necessary to underestimate the harrowing impact of this dreaded chemical. There is an urgent need to properly study the impact on the health conditions of workers in those countries which have not yet banned the use of asbestos.

The ban on use of asbestos by the EU has resulted in asbestos producers (in South Africa, Russia, Canada) searching for markets in developing countries. There are sufficient scientific data available on the occupational hazards but violations continue unabated in many countries without any action by governments.

India consumes about 125,000 tonnes of asbestos every year of which 100,000 tonnes are imported from Canada, Russian, Brazil and Zimbabwe. Though the Government has prohibited asbestos mining, illegal mines are operating in the States of Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh.

Forty-two asbestos cement plants employ over 32,000 workers and the value of output is estimated at Rs.20 billion (\$450 million). The total indirect employment in the asbestos related industry is estimated to be about 100,000.

In India no epidemiological studies have been conducted so far. However, one social activist claimed one thousand cases of asbestos related diseases in four months. According to Dr. Sudhakar Bhat, former Head of Respiratory Medicine at King George Memorial Hospital in Mumbai, "Doctors are under pressure to interpret X-rays as TB or bronchitis or other chronic conditions". Though Indian law provides compensation to victims, most of the affected workers are denied benefits due to lack of evidence.

Under these circumstances, TU intervention is of paramount importance to strengthen the global campaign to ban the use of asbestos. In India, all major TUs have demanded it but no positive steps have been taken by the Government of India in the direction of ratification of the ILO Convention on asbestos. Trade unions should join the campaign to create awareness among workers and people as one of their cardinal tasks, to give the campaign a powerful momentum. Wherever such campaigns have been vigorously pursued positive results have come.

In India, asbestos is widely used in the manufacture of pressure and non-pressure pipes used for water supply, sewage and drainage, packing material, brake linings and jointing used in automobiles, heavy equipment, nuclear power plants, thermal power plants among others. The total consumption is estimated to be 100,000 metric tons, only one fifth of which is produced indigenously.

Victims of occupational diseases are not adequately protected and rehabilitated. Trade union action in this area needs to be strengthened. International expertise should be utilised to achieve proper rehabilitation of victims.

Workers rendered jobless due to a ban on asbestos must be provided with an effective social safety net. Provision of alternative sources of livelihood must be guaranteed by the Government. Otherwise, workers employed in asbestos establishments may not support the campaign due to poverty conditions and backwardness. The TU role in rehabilitation measures needs to be stressed.

Alternatives to asbestos should be developed and popularized among the consumers of asbestos products. Trade unions should campaign for such products. Pending achievement of a total ban on asbestos, trade unions should strive for full protection of workers and consumers who are at risk.

Central TUs should create awareness among trade unions activists that they should campaign at the grassroots level for a complete ban on production, sale and use of asbestos in all spheres of life.

Exchange of International experience in the campaign against the use of asbestos will strengthen the ongoing campaign all over the world. International trade union organizations can pressurise the Governments of developing countries to gradually reduce the use of asbestos in industrial undertakings.

The ILO could be more active in drawing the attention of governments of developing countries to the dangerous consequences of the use of asbestos

International co-operation with social movements by the trade unions, to educate people at large on the need for a global asbestos ban, can be of immense help in this noble task.