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TO ALL ICEF AFFILIATED AND
ASSOCIATED ORGANIZATIONS
AND MEMBERS OF THE ETERNIT
WORLD COUNCIL

Circular Letter No. 88/81

Geneva, 15th October, 1981

Dear Colleagues:

ETERNIT BEGINS RETREAT FROM ASBESTOS

The asbestos cement manufacturing group, Eternit, has just announced the closure of three asbestos mines in Zimbabwe and the sale of its subsidiary asbestos mining company, Asbestos Investment Limited, in South Africa. These moves clearly signal the company's intention to phase out its dependency on asbestos in its various products as substitute materials become available.

They also vindicate the ICEF's position in regard to Eternit's operations in particular and the use of asbestos in general.

Representatives of the ICEF Permanent World Council for Eternit met with international management of the company in July 1976. As a result of discussions at that time, the ICEF expressed its opinion that Eternit and other leading multinational companies manufacturing asbestos products were well aware of the dangers to workers from asbestos, but were simply playing for time in fighting trade union representations on the question. Meanwhile, as the latest events prove, these companies were vigorously seeking means to move away from asbestos by developing substitutes.

Eternit's decision clearly indicates that the company has now developed alternatives, even though it continues to operate facilities in Italy and Canada and to receive a portion of its raw asbestos from the USSR. The company has continued to adopt the common line of other asbestos manufacturers, however, in refusing to discuss with the responsible trade unions those new materials which it intends to substitute for asbestos. In the light of the industry's past record this gives continued cause for concern. Such evidence as exists on the health dangers of alternative inorganic fibres (such as glass fibre) suggests a pattern remarkably similar to that of the early data for asbestos fatalities in certain stages of production. If fibres of this type are to be substituted, therefore, instead of other safer alternatives,

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there could be the danger of simply substituting a well known hazard by a less well-defined one, which may repeat the tragic pattern of asbestos as the industry continues to modify its production techniques as little and as cheaply as possible.

The present move by Eternit is further evidence of the need for negotiations to be opened at international and local levels to discuss the future of the industry and of its workforce in a planned and responsible manner.

Yours fraternally,


Charles Levinson
Secretary General