

QUEBEC LABOUR MOVEMENT POSITION REGARDING CHRYSOTILE

We agree with a conclusion reached by the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS) (Report of an IPCS Working Group Meeting on the Reduction of Asbestos in the Environment, Rome, Italy) December 12-16, 1988, particularly for chrysotile asbestos and more specifically non friable asbestos containing products, such as chrysotile-cement: "High-density asbestos products such as asbestos cement and asbestos fire-board in normal condition and use should not create an unacceptable hazard, but care is needed to contain airborne dust during installation and maintenance of these products."

We endorse the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention 162, "Safety in the Use of Asbestos", which was unanimously adopted by representatives from 143 countries in 1986. This Convention recommends strict regulations for chrysotile asbestos, and recommends that banning be limited to the use of amphibole asbestos and sprayed-on applications.

We reaffirm that the actual controversy surrounding the use of asbestos in France and the United Kingdom, concerns asbestos fibres and asbestos containing products used in the past (sprayed-on applications and lagging) and which have been prohibited or abandoned for at least 20 years, before the recent governmental bans on all uses of chrysotile.

Our position is as follows:

We consider that banning chrysotile, without taking into consideration present day uses of this mineral and its products, is an unacceptable procedure as it does not protect public health and does not resolve the problems created by past misuse, for the following reasons:

- to date, no scientific study has demonstrated, or even suggested that high-density and non-friable chrysotile containing products are a public risk;
- almost the totality of cases of asbestosis, lung cancer or mesothelioma were caused by work practices (sprayed-on applications) and working conditions existing 25 to 40 years ago (e.g. very high exposure levels accepted) abandoned a long time ago, including working with amphiboles;
- the controlled-use of chrysotile does not entail unacceptable risk.

Banning of chrysotile: False sense of security

The Quebec labour movement considers that banning all uses of chrysotile without taking into context its present-day uses, may lead the general public, as well as workers, to feel a false sense of security. As if by simply replacing asbestos containing products with asbestos free products is an automatic guarantee of safety.

Banning will have not effect as to the resolution of problems related with the management of sprayed on applications and other friable materials. Furthermore it infers that replacement materials and their manufacturing processes are safe, because they are not or are very little regulated and have not been involved in banning processes. This is in spite of the fact that the principal substitute fibres, without having undergone complete scientific evaluation, have nevertheless been identified by different international organizations, as being carcinogenic in various degrees.

The banning process therefore constitutes a dangerous and irresponsible move because:

- in industrialized and producing countries it will not result in improved working conditions nor the health of workers as the controlled use is already implemented;
- in developing countries, the use of substitute products will impose important additional costs, with no identifiable advantages in the field of health, environment and economy, to the detriment of local economies and sustainable development.

Construction Sector

Special care and attention will be taken for the installation and manipulation of chrysotile cement products on construction sites. The risk of exposure to chrysotile fibres can be controlled by taking elementary precautions.

Premanufactured products permit installation without adjustments or modifications. Cutting to specifications and drilling of holes in the manufacture are a few examples which avoid the necessity of doing so on the construction site and thus permits an assembly without exposure. The use of manual working tools do not generate the dispersion of detectable respirable fibres in the air. Only high speed tools equipped with vacuum systems with high efficiency filters will be used. Also, water is a great dust suppresser and will eliminate most fine fibres which could otherwise be suspended in the air.

ILO Convention 162

We must urge governments which have not already done so, to ratify ILO Convention 162 regarding the safe use of asbestos. Included in the convention are several aspects regarding controlled-use and more particularly:

- workers must be protected against retaliation when they exercise their duty to ensure the respect of safe work practices;
- workers must be trained in the implementation of the controlled use of chrysotile;

- scientific evaluation of substitute products and the implementation of control standards and regulations which are just as stringent as those which are in place for chrysotile;
- the prohibition of sprayed-on application and use of amphibole fibres;
- the implementation of safety measures and compensation.

Safe and Responsible use of Chrysotile

Chrysotile producers and manufacturers of chrysotile-containing products must commit themselves, contractually, to the safe and responsible use of chrysotile, on a life-cycle basis. Unions must participate in this process and make sure that these contracts are respected.

The responsible use must be based on greater exchanges of control technology, and improvement of international cooperation, at the governmental, employer as well as union levels. Employers in the chrysotile industries and their governments have an important role to play in developing countries and we request that they continue to do so by intensifying the dissemination of information to the industries and, through their influence, help unions participate in the essential process of worker training in the field of occupational health and safety.

Chrysotile must be used safely. This natural industrial mineral represents an important element for developing countries to put in place infrastructures at low cost. For example, chrysotile cement permits the construction at very affordable cost, of infrastructures for water distribution and housing, which are essential to improve public hygiene conditions. The safe and responsible use of chrysotile asbestos is in line with the principles of sustainable development. The use of chrysotile-containing products is also a factor indispensable for the progress of these countries, which in some cases, are among the impoverished countries of the planet: progress in terms of the protection and creation of employment; improvement of life styles of these populations; and, the use of local natural resources (as opposed to the import of products which are inaccessible because of their cost, for these countries).

The safe and responsible use of chrysotile is a technical reality. This is not so for all substitute products. It is therefore important that the safe and responsible use be applied to all hazardous products and substances.

Prevention

With the support of many unions in producing and consuming countries, we share the following views:

- The first objective we share is the protection of health and to ensure the safety of workers and the general public. We demand the responsible, controlled and safe use of all mineral and synthetic substances, chemical products and others. To accomplish this, we demand the implementation of appropriate and efficient work practices, which will protect workers from dangerously high levels of exposure to all potentially hazardous products and dusts. The use of chrysotile must conform to the same requirements and criteria of controls.

- To attain our objective of maximum protection, we place great importance in the organization of workers in the construction industries, in the mining and milling sectors, as well as the union participation in the safe and responsible use programs.
- This union participation must be translated into their empowerment to cease or prohibit all activities if safe work practices are not being respected.
- The focal point of our preoccupation is training of union workers in the occupational health and safety field. The point of union workers' training is to increase their knowledge which will facilitate their interventions in the work environment, to ensure the respect of the rights and the protection of all. Workers must be provided with the necessary training to exercise these powers of intervention and they should also be able to rely on appropriate regulatory and organizational assistance.
- Governments have the responsibility of providing unions with the necessary tools to train workers. They must furthermore establish strict regulatory standards in the field of air sampling and fibre controls in the ambient air, as well as the working environment. This is also true for all other products, fibres or dusts in the occupational setting.

Consultation

In addition, we urge countries which are disposed towards a ban of chrysotile, to consult with consuming and producing countries before definitely engaging in the banning process. Banning chrysotile asbestos appears to us unjustified, both scientifically and in terms of sustainable development, because of the negative impact that it would have on workers of this industry throughout the world.

Conclusion

Chrysotile can today be extracted from the mines and transformed in mills and factories, under conditions which do not put workers at any greater risk than that encountered in most other manufacturing sectors, which manufacture mineral or chemically based products. This also applies to high-density, non-friable chrysotile containing products, which do not pose a health risk to the public or the environment. We cannot say as much for substitute fibres, which we know are dangerous, and the use of which can be costly without presenting any advantages healthwise or economically. This is why the Quebec labour movement is opposed to banning chrysotile blindly and totally.

The Quebec labour movement is prepared to play an active role in the responsible use of chrysotile. In a country which has been producing chrysotile for decades, the workers have learned how to safely extract and manipulate and transform chrysotile. They are prepared to share their knowledge and experience with their counterparts in other countries.

It is in our interest to discuss the ways and means we have used to ensure the maximum protection of health and occupational and environmental safety, to which all populations of the world have a right.