

Confederation internationale des Syndicats de travailleurs de la chimie et des industries diverses
Federacion Internacional de organizaciones sindicales de trabajadores de la quimica e industrias diversas
Internationale Föderation von Chemie- und Fabrikarbeitervverbänden
International Fabrikarbejder-Föderation

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TO ALL ICF AFFILIATED AND
ASSOCIATED ORGANIZATIONS

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Dear Colleague:

CANCER THREAT TO ASBESTOS WORKERS

Asbestos has long been recognized as an exceedingly toxic substance for workers handling it from the initial stage of mining to its use as commercial and industrial material for a variety of industries.

Recently, the extent of the hazard has resulted in demands for absolute elimination of the asbestos exposure, given that there are virtually no low, safe levels. Despite this fact, certain International Agencies, which continue to demonstrate an anti-labour bias in their elitist cooperation with industry and moneyed interests, are hindering the establishment of most necessary and urgently needed safety standards.

In regard to the PVC Campaign against angiosarcoma, a cancer of the liver due to Vinyl Chloride, certain Trade Union National Centers have decided to raise this question with the International Agency for Research on Cancer in Lyon (France), which is an associated agency of the World Health Organization. ICF is aware of many occasions in which questions of close cooperation between this Agency and big business have arisen, whilst showing a remarkable disdain and disinterest in a similar cooperation with organizations representing the trade unions.

We have written to the WHO asking for consultative status, such as we have been accorded by ECOSOC, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, in order to represent the interests of workers in matters of occupational health not only in the chemical and allied industries, but also in respect to the pharmaceutical industry with which the World Health Organization has Standing Committees.

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It has now been confirmed that there are many thousands - perhaps v n millions - of workers who have been exposed to asbestos and who face an extraordinary high cancer risk. Many thousands will die after retirement, for the cancer will manifest itself only many years after the initial exposure. The asbestos cancer threat is one which does not permit discussions on reasonable standards, low risk levels, etc. Studies show that among groups of asbestos workers one in every five deaths is due to lung

cancer and one in fifteen deaths is due to mesothelioma, which is so rare in the population as a whole that it does not occur more than once in ten thousand deaths.

Accepting "calculated" risks for economic reasons is no longer tolerable and we alert affiliates to immediately seek total no-exposure levels for their members working with asbestos. In this connection, we would like to bring to your attention the accompanying letter of Brother Tony Mazzocchi, Director, Citizenship-Legislative Department of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union of the U.S. and Canada, and a leading figure in the fight for a new policy in regard to health and safety matters on the action of the IARC regarding asbestos workers. We have confirmed from impeccable medical sources and unquestionable authority that such criticism is entirely valid and we associate ourselves without qualification with its content.

We believe it is time that a deep-rooted and widespread pro-industry elitist bias in the United Nations and other International Agencies be contested. Even though increasingly big business and its associated organizations are subsidizing United Nations' programs, the bulk of the funds comes from public sources - which means workers' income taxes. The natural propensity of international civil servants and academics to cater to the elitist and bureaucratic power establishment, which exposes itself often as an implicit denigration of workers and trade union capacities, has contributed to a profound atrophy of U.N. programs and policies. We are convinced that a new and more direct participation by our unions, as distinct from the past exclusive representation through the highly centralized world organizations of national centers (ICFTU, WFTU, WCL, etc.), is vital if a more dynamic and effectual voice of labour is to make itself heard in the bureaucracies of the world today.

The case of cancer threats to asbestos workers is a critical case in point.

Yours fraternally,

Charles Levinson
Charles Levinson
Secretary General

Enclosure

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