

ALU-TUCP Press Release
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Workers Group Refiles Bill in Philippine Congress Protecting Construction Workers and Communities From Fatal Asbestos Dust

MANILA-The Associated Labor Unions-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (ALU-TUCP), the biggest labor federation in the country, re-filed a bill in the House of Representatives banning the importation, manufacture, process, use and distribution in commerce of deadly asbestos and asbestos-containing products in the country aimed at protecting construction workers and communities from asbestos related diseases.

“The problem with asbestos is that, once workers are exposed to its dust, symptoms of the diseases related to it will manifest 10 to 15 years later. Banning asbestos is the way to go if we want to protect our workers and the general populations from first-hand and secondary exposure,” said Gerard Seno, executive vice president of ALU-TUCP.

Seno is also program coordinator of ban asbestos advocacy campaign in the country. The ALU-TUCP campaign partners with Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) in trade union lobby for the approval of the bill.

The bill, which was filed in previous two congresses, is now known as House Bill 2638. It was introduced by TUCP Party-List Rep. Raymond Mendoza.

The ban takes effect one year after the proposed bill is enacted into law giving government agencies the necessary period of transition. While it seeks total ban, the proposal allows the Health and the Defense department to give exemptions on some select uses of asbestos upon filing of petition for exemption for a specific period as long as these would not result to risk of injury to public health or to the environment and if there is no alternative to it.

It also calls for building owners and contractors to demolish buildings containing asbestos, transport and dispose the same using the observed standard safety protocols once it is effective into law. Violators of the provisions will be fined with P100,000 to P1 million or imprisonment of not less than 3 months but not more than 3 years.

It provides for a central registry of workers exposed to asbestos and calls for an establishment of an asbestos related disease research and treatment network to support the detection, prevention, treatment and cure of asbestos-related diseases with emphasis on mesothelioma.

“Asbestos dust has killed thousands of workers and other members of the communities here and around the world several years after they were directly and indirectly expose to its dust. There are thousands more who are currently being wasted away by pain and consumed by misery caused by asbestos related cancers and other diseases due to exposure. Many of them had expended their retirement pay and pension benefits in medications and in treating asbestos-related diseases. This legislative proposal will put an end to this vicious cycle,” Mendoza said.

In the Philippines, an estimated 1.3 million workers in construction and general industry are significantly exposed to asbestos dust every day. Heaviest exposure happens at removal of asbestos during renovation or demolition of buildings and structures.

The government issued the Chemical Control Order for Asbestos in year 2000 in regulating the importation, use, manufacture, transport and disposal of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials after a screening program in 1992 to 1996 by the Lung Center of the Philippines found more than half of 1,542 workers in shipyard in Subic Naval Base in Zambales contracted asbestos-related cancers and other diseases amid exposure to asbestos-laden materials.

The ban bill was introduced in the light of poor enforcement of the CCO. Though it limits the use of asbestos on several items and prohibits new uses and application of asbestos, the CCO does not have the teeth to hold violators accountable.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said all forms of asbestos are carcinogenic. It said there are about 125 million people in the world are exposed to asbestos at the workplace or 107,000 people die each year from asbestos-related lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis. ###

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ABOUT ALU

Founded by dock workers in 1954, the Associated Labor Unions (ALU) had since been the country's pioneer in championing the ideals of free trade unionism. Along with its affiliates, partners here and abroad, and an alliance with the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), ALU has been steadfast advocate of the plight of the toiling masses working in 17 industries both in private and public sectors.

As a pioneering unions in the Philippines, the ALU works toward ensuring the rights, interests and welfare of regular and non-regular workers and makes sure these are promoted and protected i.e. security of tenure, freedom of association, collective bargaining or collective negotiation, and providing limits in the duration and renewal of employment contracts of non-regular workers to enable them enjoy the benefits accorded to regular workers.

ABOUT ALU & BWI

While ALU exist to serve the interest of working class through various advocacies, it also partners with Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) in working toward asbestos responsible ban and phase out in the Philippines. The partnership works to eliminate asbestos-related diseases found in public and private infrastructures and buildings such as homes, schools, work places, churches, malls, including power plants.###