

THE ASBESTOS FRONTLINE: THEN AND NOW

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In 1989, the world council and board of the International Federation of Building and Woodworkers – now the Building and Woodworkers International – issued a global call for an end to asbestos use. This was a radical step which put the federation at the forefront of public discourse about asbestos and preceded by fifteen years similar action by international agencies. At the time this position was adopted, industry stakeholders asserted that asbestos was an obscure issue affecting a small number of workers. That was as untrue then as it is now. In 2014, the global asbestos dialogue is a mainstream discourse encompassing fundamental matters such as human rights, public health, social justice and economic sustainability. Whether or not the use of asbestos is sanctioned is as much a political, social and environmental decision as it is an economic one. Indeed, a case being adjudicated by the Brazilian Supreme Court is considering the legal ramifications posed by the federal policy of “controlled use” – how can the mining and consumption of an acknowledged toxin be lawful when citizens' rights to health and the dignity of labor are guaranteed under the country's constitution?

As the agenda of this conference recognizes, the asbestos war is now being fought on two fronts: countries where asbestos has been banned and those in which consumption remains legal. In the time allotted, I will discuss developments from each group and draw conclusions about the way forward.

Countries with Asbestos Bans: UK, Japan and Korea

Twenty-five years ago, annual UK asbestos consumption was 16,000 tonnes (t). After more a hundred years and the import of seven million tonnes of asbestos, in 1999 the government finally prohibited the import, sale and use of asbestos. Unfortunately, the industrial and environmental asbestos legacy which remains constitutes a serious threat. A case in point is the contamination of the educational infrastructure. It has been estimated that asbestos-containing material is present in more than 75% of all schools.¹ Evidence submitted to an Education Select Committee in 2013 estimated that up to three hundred people a year could die from childhood asbestos exposures at school during the 1960s and 1970s;² over twenty years that would produce a death toll of 6,000.

In 2007, civil society stakeholders, including asbestos victims, trade unionists, NGO representatives, asbestos consultants, Members of Parliament and health and safety campaigners, founded a new body to address this “national scandal:” the Asbestos in Schools

¹ During the 20th century, materials containing crocidolite, amosite and chrysotile asbestos were routinely used in the construction of British educational institutions. A range of highly toxic asbestos products, including insulation board (amosite), sprayed coatings (amphiboles), Asbestolux ceiling panels and walls were incorporated within the 13,000 schools built between 1945 and 1974.

² Education Select Committee hearing Asbestos in Schools. Oral evidence Professor J. Peto. 13th March 2013. E-mail Professor Peto/Lees 1 May 2013. Other evidence considered by the Select Committee accepted that children are more vulnerable to asbestos exposures than adults. As long as the asbestos incorporated within the educational infrastructure remains in place and is frequently disturbed, deaths will continue.

Group (AiS). As a result of pressure brought by the AiS, this issue has achieved a national prominence. Tangible evidence of the effectiveness of the AiS is the:

- acknowledgement by the Prime Minister (2009) that asbestos in schools is a serious problem and one that his government would address;
- formation (2010) by the Department for Education of an Asbestos in Schools Steering Group which makes recommendations to the Minister;
- tacit acknowledgement by the Department for Education (2010) that it has overall responsibility for asbestos in schools;
- publication by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Occupational Health and Safety of *Asbestos in Schools – the Need for Action* (2012); the 2014 reissue of an updated version;³
- House of Commons Education Committee hearings on asbestos in schools (2013);
- review by the Committee of Carcinogenicity on “The Relative Vulnerability of Children to Asbestos compared to Adults (2013);”
- Department of Education review of the Government’s policy of managing asbestos in schools (2014).

Speaking about the AiS Michael Lees, one of the founding members of the campaign, says:

“Although asbestos remains in the majority of our schools, awareness of the hazard has risen due to the efforts of the AiS Group. There have been no quick fixes nor do we expect them; however, constructive progress has been made. What we do believe is that all political parties must work together to form long term strategic policies so that this problem can be eradicated once and for all.”

Italy

People may be unaware that in the late 19th century, Italy was the world’s primary supplier of asbestos. Output increased throughout the 20th century, peaking in 1980 at 157,794t. In 1990, three years before Italy banned asbestos, production and consumption were 3,862t and 62,407t respectively. As these figures demonstrate, asbestos was widely used and highly valued in Italy; as a result, the asbestos hazard presents a continuing danger to public and occupational health.

As long as the risk persists, care must be taken to enhance the public’s knowledge about asbestos. As people enter the workforce, they need to be educated about potential exposures; the same is true with homeowners, consumers and community members. An innovative campaign to promote awareness was launched on International Workers Memorial Day 2013 by a consortium of Italian groups composed of asbestos victims and trade unions. The designers of the images at the heart of this initiative were instructed to create material that would speak to people aged between 18 and 35 years old. They chose to do so through the use of a series of photographs promoting the tattooed slogan: “Asbestos Free.”

Korea

³ *Asbestos in Schools – the Need for Action*. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Occupational Health and Safety. Updated March 2014.
<http://www.asbestosexposureschools.co.uk/pdfnewlinks/APPG%20booklet%2017%20Mar%202014%20Asbestos%20in%20schools.pdf>

In 1990, nearly twenty years before the Republic of Korea banned asbestos, the country was Asia's 5th largest asbestos user.⁴ Small-scale Korean asbestos mining operations added to the country's toxic legacy. Proactive initiatives by Korean asbestos victims and their partners to raise the profile of the asbestos hazard have been successful in attracting public attention and forcing government action. In 2009, the Ban Asbestos Network of Korea announced that asbestos fibers had been found in baby powder sold in Korea. The furore that ensued was colossal and led to regulatory action by the Korea Food and Drug Administration.

Two years later, The Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health published test results which confirmed that soil used in baseball parks contained tremolite, actinolite and chrysotile asbestos fibers in concentrations which exceeded permissible levels. The soil used had been sourced from two former asbestos mines! As a result of the scandal which ensued in 2012 the Environment Ministry implemented measures to control exposures to naturally occurring asbestos.

Countries without Asbestos Bans: China, Russia, India

According to data from the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the global value of annual asbestos production is believed to be as much as \$1.3 billion. Asbestos remains a profitable and influential industry in producing countries. Despite the political and financial influence wielded by vested interests in these countries, civil society activists continue to mobilize support for government action to outlaw asbestos and obtain justice for the injured.

China

In 1990, China was the fourth largest supplier of raw asbestos and the third largest consumer.⁵ Nowadays, China is the second most important supplier, accounting for 21% of global production, and the biggest consumer (530,834t in 2012); India is the second largest consumer (493,086t) in 2012. Chinese asbestos markets account for 27% of worldwide consumption. Considering the considerable clout that asbestos stakeholders have in China, it is little short of miraculous that on April 4, 2014, Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, banned asbestos. This incredible achievement was effected by civil society mobilization and political pressure. The "No More Asbestos in Hong Kong Alliance" played a prominent part in the ban asbestos campaign. The results of its 2013 investigation highlighted the ubiquity of environmental asbestos contamination and called for the Hong Kong authorities to enact prohibitions. How or if this legislation will impact on the mainland, remains to be seen.

Russia

In 1990, the Soviet Union produced 2,400,000t and used 2,151,800t of asbestos accounting, respectively, for 55% and 49% of all global trade. In 2012, the corresponding figures for Russia were 1,000,000t and 155,476t, making Russia the world's biggest asbestos supplier and fourth biggest user. Asbestos remains big business in Russia and the asbestos mafia has

⁴ Annual Korean consumption in 1990 was 88,722 t; in 2000 and 2008, it was 30,124 t and 659 t, respectively.

⁵ According to USGS data, asbestos production in 1990 was: Russia 2,400,000 t, Canada 724,620 t, Brazil 205,220 t and China 191,800 t. The top three consuming countries were: Russia 2,151,800 t, Japan 295,701 t and China 185,748 t.

close and enduring ties with the political establishment. Despite a climate which actively discourages discussion of the hazard, activists have undertaken research and begun a dialogue on asbestos.⁶

Volgograd, a city in the midst of Russia's asbestos heartland, was the venue for a series of asbestos events organized in 2012 including a workshop, radio interview and discussions with key stakeholders. In attendance at the workshop, which was co-organized by Russian NGOs: the Eco-Accord Program on Chemical Safety and Volgograd-Ecopress,⁷ were representatives of state environmental bodies, medical professionals, occupational health research bodies, regional trade unions, local authorities and local non-governmental organizations. Prior to this event, many of them had been unaware of the health effects of exposure to asbestos.

India

In 1990, India's ranking in asbestos league tables was of minor significance. The country produced 26,053t and used 118,964t. By 2012, the situation had changed radically and India had become the world's largest asbestos importer (493,086t), with the world's second biggest asbestos market.⁸

Mobilization of ban asbestos activism has been ongoing in India for a number of years and the work of asbestos victims as well as NGO campaigners at the Occupational and Environmental Health Network of India, the Other Media – Corporate Accountability Desk, People's Training and Research Centre (Gujarat), Occupational Health and Safety Centre (Mumbai), the Mine Labour Protection Campaign (Rajasthan), the Occupational Health and Safety Association (Ahmedabad), Centre for Occupational & Environmental Health (Delhi) and Toxics Link, and their trade union partners at Building and Woodworker International affiliates and other labor federations, has brought new voices to a debate formally controlled by commercial interests.

While industry lobbyists maintain that asbestos can be used "safely under controlled conditions," the faces of India's asbestos victims tell another story. It is these faces which make visible a problem long suppressed – the human price paid for asbestos industry profits. A pilot project being progressed by Drs. Helen Clayson and Abhijeet Jadhav aims to deliver evidence-based low-tech, low-cost techniques and strategies to Indians affected by advanced asbestosis with the intention of relieving the suffering caused by breathlessness in asbestos hotspots such as Mumbai and Ahmedabad.⁹ This program has the potential of not only benefiting the injured but increasing the visibility of their plight.

Conclusion

⁶ It is important to point out that Russian asbestos lobbyists now dominate the global industry lobby, using the vast wealth at their disposal to finance glossy, multilingual propaganda and pro-asbestos campaigns.

⁷ Speranskaya O. *Workshop: Elimination of Asbestos-related Diseases in Volgograd, Russia, August 27-29, 2012*. <http://ibasecretariat.org/os-volgograd-workshop-report-sep2012.php>

⁸ Kazan-Allen L. *Growth of Asian Asbestos Markets*. June 9, 2013. <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-growth-of-asian-asbestos-markets.php>

⁹ Clayson H, Jadhav A. "SHWAAS" – a Breathlessness Intervention Project to help People in India with Asbestosis. September 17, 2013.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/hc-aj-breathlessness-intervention-project-india-asbestosis.php>

Twenty-five years ago when the Building and Woodworkers International issued its call for an asbestos ban, four million tonnes of asbestos were used annually by 64 countries; consumption has now halved with fewer than half that number of hard-core countries consuming more than 1,000t/year. That any profitability remains in the sale of asbestos is solely due to the feverish and aggressive methods pursued by commercial and government stakeholders.

As the examples cited in this paper illustrate, revolutionizing national asbestos debates and delivering justice to the injured is possible. The prospects for successful campaigns are increased by collaboration with a broad-based grassroots network, the use of creativity to capture public and media attention, integrating specific awareness projects within comprehensive frameworks and the use of innovative methods for communicating our message. The international movement to ban asbestos has achieved a prominence and momentum that are undeniable. Our commitment is unwavering; the struggle continues!