

THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL ASBESTOS VICTIMS' MOVEMENT

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Asbestos is the world's most devastating industrial killer; while companies and governments profited, workers and producing communities experienced a silent epidemic that maimed and killed at will. In the absence of official interest, deaths went uncounted and suffering went unacknowledged. After 20 years studying global asbestos issues, I can distil my experience as follows: "No one ever gave asbestos victims anything they didn't fight for."

In 1980, there were only a handful of isolated victims' groups working on asbestos issues; nowadays such groups exist on 6 out of 7 continents; Antarctica being the exception. The last time I counted, there were in excess of 60 groups, many of which offer assistance in person, by telephone and on-line.¹ In 1980, not one country had banned asbestos, as of now all industrialized countries have either prohibited or seriously restricted its use with more than 40 national bans in place.² Worldwide asbestos usage has more than halved from 4,728,619 tons in 1980 to 2,023,447 tons in 2006. Industry propaganda which maintains that asbestos can be "used safely under controlled conditions" has, as far as international agencies and developed governments are concerned, been totally discredited; there is now a global consensus that the best way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is to ban asbestos.

Magic Wand or Sheer Hard Graft?

Wresting control of the asbestos debate away from vested interests has not been easy nor has it been quick. Accomplishing this major paradigm shift from "controlled use" to "no use" has been the result of years of hard work. It has required the mobilization not only of asbestos victims and their supporters but of scientists, environmentalists, doctors, civil servants, trade unionists, engineers, technicians, lawyers and academics who were able and willing to take on powerful and well-resourced opponents. Making common cause with asbestos campaigners often laid the professionals open to attack from ruthless corporate bully boys such as Denis Hamel of the (Canadian) Chrysotile Institute and industry thugs, well paid to victimize those who campaign for a ban.

International Action

The rebirth of the global asbestos victims' movement took place in Brazil at the Global Asbestos Congress in 2000. For the first time, asbestos victims' groups and campaigners from many countries met with trade unionists, politicians, doctors and other experts to

¹ See Appendix A: Global Asbestos Victims Groups

² *Current Asbestos Bans and Regulations*. See: http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_alpha_asb_ban_280704.php

explore the possibilities for future collaboration. The pioneering efforts of ABREA and its supporters, organizers of GAC 2000, were fundamental in laying the groundwork for the social network which has blossomed since that meeting.

What is Being Done...

Using the internet and innovative outreach programs, civil society in countries around the world are succeeding in raising public and professional awareness of asbestos issues. Increasing collaboration amongst different sectors of civil society is maximizing the effectiveness of the campaign to ban asbestos and provide support for asbestos victims. The bad old days when the asbestos industry had a stranglehold on media and government debates on asbestos are long gone. Even in Canada, a country so devoted to asbestos that they named a town after it, coverage about the national asbestos epidemic is beginning to appear in the media. In Brazil, one of the world's leading asbestos producers, journalists routinely consult ABREA on stories about asbestos; considering the situation 10 years ago, the input of victims into the Brazilian national asbestos debate has radicalized coverage of this issue.

Recent Asbestos Events

The escalation of local, national, regional and global interest in asbestos is revealed by the numerous asbestos events which are being held in both developed and developing countries. A look at the asbestos calendar reveals increasing collaboration by victims' groups which have actively reached out to potential allies in trade unions, the medical community, academic institutions, the legal professional, town councils and Parliaments. A by-product of this new inclusiveness has been a series of imaginative initiatives, many of which are landmark events.

November 2007

- ***The International Asbestos Conference***, Yokohama, Japan. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Ban Asbestos Network of Japan, representatives from civil society in Asia and Europe compared national systems for compensating victims of asbestos-related diseases.³
- ***Asbestos Workshop***, Yokohama, Japan was organized by the National Railway Union and IBAS; it was the first session held on asbestos by this trade union branch.
- ***The Philippines Forum on Banning Asbestos*** was held by affiliates of the Building and Woodworkers International, a global labor federation.
- ***The 2007 Asbestos Memorial Service*** of the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia took place at the Redemptorist Monastery in Perth. This was the 12th year this service has been held; as usual, the hall was full to capacity.⁴

³ http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_yokohama_conf_rep.php

⁴ Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Activism Down-Under*. January 2008.
http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_act_au2007.php

December 2007

- *An Asbestos Session* was on the agenda of the *Workshop on Occupational and Environmental Health in The Asia/Pacific Region Workshop*, a two-day event coorganized by the Collegium Ramazzini in Bangkok, Thailand.
- *Asbestos Meetings in India* included presentations by international experts on medical and environmental asbestos issues.
- *Christmas Picnic and Barbecue* held by the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia provided victims, family members and supporters a chance to enjoy a typical Aussie barbecue and meet Father Christmas at Whiteman Park, Perth.

January 2008

- A campaign began to mobilize NGOs in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Russia to raise awareness of the asbestos hazard and to make asbestos a priority campaigning issue.

February 2008

- *International Trade Union Conference on Asbestos*, a two-day conference held in Vienna by the Building and Woodworkers International, provided affiliated unions from Central and East European countries with updated and impartial information on the asbestos hazard.
- *International Conference on Malignant Mesothelioma in the Twenty-First Century*, a two-day conference in Cairo, was organized by the National Institute of Cancer, Cairo University and the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS); it was the first international conference on mesothelioma in Egypt.
- *Action Mesothelioma Day* was marked throughout the UK with balloon releases, conferences and public events to highlight the on-going national asbestos epidemic which is claiming more than 3,000 lives every year.⁵

March 2008

- *Mesothelioma Study Day* in Manchester, England focused primarily on medical treatment and care of patients but also considered legal and political issues.
- *The 4th Annual Asbestos Awareness Conference* held by the Asbestos Diseases Awareness Organization brought members of the global ban asbestos community together for 3 days of activities in Detroit, Michigan.
- *Save the Rotterdam Convention!*, a campaign backed by groups representing civil society from every continent, was launched on March 11, 2008 to highlight the threat posed by blocking the inclusion of chrysotile on the Prior Informed Consent list of the Rotterdam Convention, a potentially life-saving multilateral agreement.

⁵ Kazan-Allen L. *Day of Asbestos Action*. February 2008.
http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_amd_08_report.php

April 2008

- On International Workers' Memorial Day, trade union events in New Delhi, Chennai (Tamil Nadu State), Thrissur (Kerala State), highlighted the asbestos hazard construction workers face and called for a ban and support for the injured; in Islamabad, Pakistan 1,700 workers marched through the streets with banners and placards calling for an asbestos ban; in the Philippines, there was a large outdoor demonstration in Quezon City followed by an asbestos workshop and the symbolic signing of the *Ban Asbestos Now Mural!*
- A concert to raise money for mesothelioma research was held in the town of Deskle, a Slovenian asbestos hotspot due to the operations of a large asbestos-cement factory in the area.
- Asbestos was on the agenda of *The International Conference on Occupational Cancer* in Stirling; this event brought trade unionists, activists and academics from Australia, the U.S. and Europe to Scotland for two days of plenary sessions and strategy discussions.

May 2008

- *The Annual Asbestos Seminar in the House of Commons* was the setting for a stimulating presentation by Professor Bruce Robinson from the National Centre for Asbestos-Related Disease Research in Australia. Politicians and victims' representatives at this meeting asked: If Australia can have a centre, why can't Britain?
- *A Hearing by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour on the Health Impact of Asbestos on Workers in India* was held in New Delhi. Campaigner Madhumitta Dutta, a grass-roots activist, gave a presentation about hazardous exposures experienced by those involved in the mining, processing and use of asbestos in India.
- A briefing of Democratic staffers on the Energy and Commerce Committee in Washington D.C. was held to discuss a House bill to ban asbestos and institute a public awareness campaign. Experts who gave evidence at this hearing included: Mrs. Linda Reinstein, Executive Director of the ADAO, the voice of U.S. asbestos victims.

June 2008

- A series of asbestos events in São Paulo and Vitoria da Conquista, Poções, Bom Jesus da Serra, Brazil is being held which will include workshops on medical, legal and social issues presented by some of the world's leading experts.
- *The XVIIIth World Congress on Safety and Health at Work*, an ILO event, is taking place in Korea and includes 3 symposia on Asbestos:
ILO & WHO Action Toward the Elimination of Asbestos-Related Diseases (ILO)
Asbestos – A Global Disaster (ISSA)
Asbestos: International Trade Union Campaign on Eliminating Asbestos Use and Preventing Asbestos Disease (BWI)

July 2008

- Two days of asbestos meetings, strategy sessions and workshops in Seoul and Busan, Korea organized by asbestos victims, academics, NGOs and trade unions will focus on asbestos issues in Asia highlighting the transfer of dirty technology.
- A series of seminars and meetings including discussions on future events in Hong Kong.

Concluding Thoughts

In some countries, national umbrella groups, like ABREA, the Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum UK and the Japan Association of Mesothelioma and Asbestos-Related Disease Victims and their Families, enable asbestos victims' groups to speak with one voice. Regionally and internationally other groups, such as IBAS, the Ban Asbestos Network, the Asia Monitor Resource Center, the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims, the Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation and others carry the message forward.

The asbestos odyssey which began in Osasco has brought us many victories. Asbestos has become a pariah substance throughout the industrialized world and has even been banned in some developing countries. Judging by the events listed above, there can be little doubt that victims' groups and campaigners are now participating at the highest levels of asbestos policy-making in many countries. The formation of new global alliances such as the NGO Platform on Shipbreaking and the Rotterdam Convention Alliance are enabling asbestos victims to make common cause with other groups fighting similar battles around the world. Together we are stronger. Our goals remain a global ban on asbestos and justice for all asbestos victims. *A luta continua* (The struggle continues)!

International Asbestos Victims' Support Groups

Australia

Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia
Asbestos Diseases Society of Victoria
Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia Inc.
Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc.
Queensland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Society Inc.

Belgium

National Association of Belgian Asbestos Victims (ABEVA)

Brazil

Associação Brasileira dos Expostos ao Amianto (ABREA); branches in Osasco, Rio de Janeiro, Simões Filho, Vale do Paraíba, São José dos Pinhais, Minaçu, São Caetano do Sul and Poções.

Canada

Ban Asbestos Canada
Asbestos Victims Association of Quebec

Chile

Association of Asbestos Victims (ACHVA)

France

Association Nationale de Defense des Victimes de l'Amiante (ANDEVA): 20 branches throughout France
Ban Asbestos France

Hong Kong

Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims in Hong Kong

India

Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV)
Ban Asbestos Network of India

Italy

The Italian Association of the Asbestos-Exposed (AEA): branches in Casale Monferrato, Monfalcone and Padua

Japan

Ban Asbestos Network Japan (BANJAN)
Japan Occupational Safety and Health Resource Center

Japan Association of Mesothelioma and Asbestos-related Disease Victims and their Families

Netherlands

Dutch Asbestos Victims' Committee

New Zealand

Asbestos Diseases Association of New Zealand

Switzerland

Verein für Asbestopfer und Angehörige

Comité d'orientation et de défense des victimes de l'amiante (CAOVA)

United Kingdom

Society for the Prevention of Asbestosis and Industrial Diseases

Hull Asbestos Action Group

Clydeside Action on Asbestos

Clydebank Asbestos Victims Group

Sheffield and Rotherham Asbestos Support Group

Greater Manchester Asbestos Victims Support Group

Merseyside and District Asbestos Support Group

Cheshire Asbestos Victims Support Group

Bradford Asbestos Victims Support Group

Barrow Asbestos-Related Disease Support

Barking and Dagenham Asbestos Victims Support Group

Hampshire Asbestos Support and Awareness Group

Derbyshire Asbestos Support Team

Ridings Asbestos Support & Awareness Group

Northeast Asbestos Support and Awareness Group

The Asbestos Victims Group for NW Ireland

Justice for Asbestos Victims in Northern Ireland

USA

Asbestos Diseases Awareness Organization

White Lung Association

Libby Asbestos Victim's Support