

Meeting of Representatives of Indian Trade Unions and Civil Society with Australian Senator Lisa Singh

Constitution Club of India, New Delhi

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Report by Mohit Gupta¹

An interaction between Australian Senator Lisa Singh, Trade Unions² and civil society was held at the Constitution Club of India. The meeting was jointly organised by Occupational and Environmental Health Network of India (OEHNI), BWI and IndustriALL. Sh Sudharshan Rao gave a brief background of use of Asbestos in India. Mr Rao informed about the Kerala Human rights Commission judgement which ordered the schools to remove Asbestos Cement Sheets from their facility; however, the order has still not been implemented. He also informed that the strategy is to take small steps i.e. we try and introduce a ban in one state and then move to other states to eventually achieve a national ban. The first state targeted is Kerala where a memorandum was submitted in April to the chief minister. Next month a similar program is planned in Odisha.

Sh Mittal informed that OSH has remained a low priority theme in occupations in India. There have been occasions where officials and employers were invited to various programs to present their OSH policy but unfortunately they usually provide only accident policy and not OSH policies. Not enough weight is given to diagnosis to escape paying compensation by the employers to the affected workers. During the last few years information on Asbestos is growing. There have been a few success stories on Asbestos mining ban but its use and manufacture continues. We talk of international solidarity and on occasions have spoken with representatives of other nations/groups, but nothing has really changed. He also expressed his concern that due to paucity of resources and lack of focus on all issues with Central Trade unions in India, the issue of Asbestos has not been a high priority.

An overview of the Asbestos industry in India was provided. The industry is worth over \$900 million and has over 121 units across the country which are primarily owned by 17 major enterprises. Employers have their own association and there is a very strong lobby in the country. The companies are owned by the parliamentarians or their relatives. The mining of asbestos is banned due to health reasons but imports and manufacturing are freely allowed. Is the government following a double standard? There is a complete lack of data in public domain. Most of workforce is contractual labour who are illiterate and do not have any information on OSH. They handle Asbestos with bare hands and we can understand how grave the situation is. Anup informed about the change in India's position during the Rotterdam convention but the government refused to provide a clear reason for this change of policy. There are some steps being taken like Railways removing Asbestos from platforms, a proposal being included in the 12th Five year plan to eliminate Asbestosis. Another important development is regarding the Canadian Government's decision to reopen the Jeffery Mines which will ensure that more and more Asbestos will reach Indian Shores. There have been some good developments on the grass root level where in several states the community protested against the setting up of factories and ensured that these units do not get built.

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² All National Trade Union Centres were present at the meeting.

There was a concern regarding what material should a poor man use for construction of his house. We can talk about a ban on Asbestos but we should also talk about substitutes and alternates particularly in rural and backward areas. An example was provided from Kanpur and Nagpur where 2 cow shelters were made of a sheet similar to Asbestos Cement sheet using cow dung which is cheap and eco-friendly. If we have similar products and alternates available, only then will a ban be viable. More such products should be found and promoted.

The participants stated that unfortunately, there is no strong political will of the Government to ban use of Asbestos and no substitutes and alternates available in the market.

Senator Singh gave a brief background of her work and current situation in Australia. She said that India should learn from what Australia has already gone through and ensure that they do not suffer the same things. She said that Australia is currently witnessing the third wave of Asbestos related diseases, the workers, their family members and now their children. She informed that the Australian PM has a lot of interest in OSH and a committee is working on a federal law on National harmonization on OSH conditions to be implemented across the country, which has been supported by the union movement.

She said that we also need support of neighbouring countries and friends to help move towards a ban. She promised all possible help in this regards along with other ministers. She said that a resolution was developed at the Labour Party conference last year which initially did not mention Asbestos. This was improved by the then foreign minister who has asked for a global alliance conference to be held in Australia bringing representatives to share experiences, because we owe this to the world.

She informed regarding the Asbestos Cement plant in Tasmania, Australia which was converted to a non-asbestos cement plant after the Australian Ban, without any loss of employment or significant costs (a case study or more information was requested from the Senator). So it doesn't have to be "ALL or NOTHING game". We know that all Asbestos kills whether it is white, brown or blue. We need to help Indian Government and industry to understand that. We need to remove any blockage to help with this understanding. By opening doors, by giving subsidies, they are in fact killing their workforce and we need to do whatever we can to turn this around. We have nearly 700 deaths every year in Australia which is rising. We have a government funded Mesothelioma registry. She also asked the participants for any kind of help required to achieve a ban on asbestos and stop the Canadian exports.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks to the Senator for giving her valuable time and all the participants for their inputs.





