

The asbestos industry may be ailing, but it's not dead yet. Latest figures show in 2006, worldwide production of asbestos was 2,147,860 metric tonnes. The big five producers – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Brazil and Canada – accounted for 94 per cent of production and 91 per cent of exports.

Asbestos is still a money-spinner, and the industry is investing in a major promotional drive to protect its trade in chrysotile (white asbestos). But it is not limiting this global campaign to product marketing. It is resorting to threats and the courts to harass campaigners for an asbestos ban.

A meeting of anti-asbestos campaigners in Thetford, Quebec, had to be cancelled this year after industry thugs "threatened our worker contacts with violence and firings," a Canadian union activist said. Union campaigners at the World Health and Safety Congress in Korea in July 2008 were provided minders as the atmosphere soured. Asbestos industry association speakers at the congress made defamatory attacks on union and asbestos disease campaigners. And international delegates to a February ban asbestos conference organised by the global building unions' federation BWI found the hotel lobby festooned with pro-asbestos materials on their arrival. Delegates were intimidated at the conference and, in some cases, on their flights home.

The best resourced and more influential of the industry lobby groups is the Montreal-based Chrysotile Institute (CI). With the Canadian federal and Quebec governments as major financial backers, it is marshalling the public relations drive and the legal assault on ban asbestos campaigners. In May 2008, its lawyers sent a letter threatening legal action to BWI, one of CI's sternest critics. And in July, François Desrioux, a driving force behind the French asbestos victim support group Andeva, appeared in a Paris court to answer libel charges brought against him by the institute. The industry front organisation is claiming "public criminal libel of a private individual". It complains the institute is described on the Andeva website as "a body highly active in propaganda and subornation" [inducing others to commit an illegal act].

HESA, the health and safety research arm of the European trade union confederation ETUC, which is supporting Desrioux, commented that CI "divides its activities between promoting asbestos and harassing the industry's opponents through the media, politics and the law." It concluded: "It takes some gall to attack the 17,000 sufferers of diseases caused by asbestos who are grouped together in Andeva, and to brand their condemnation of those who are responsible for their suffering and their accomplices as libel!"



CANADA'S SHAME The Chrysotile Institute is heavily reliant on funding from the Canadian government. ETUC safety thinktank HESA says as a consequence the Canadian government is implicated in the "mass crime of asbestos use." This child stands on asbestos waste in Brazil, one of Canada's export markets.

Asbestos

NO JUSTICE Despite being banned since 1999, the number of asbestos related disease cases in the UK is still increasing, leaving victims fighting for their lives and for compensation.



NEW VICTIMS A new generation of non-industrial workers are developing asbestos cancers. Former nurse Mary Artherton was awarded compensation this year after developing the incurable cancer mesothelioma, caused by exposure to the asbestos used in the hospital buildings where she worked.



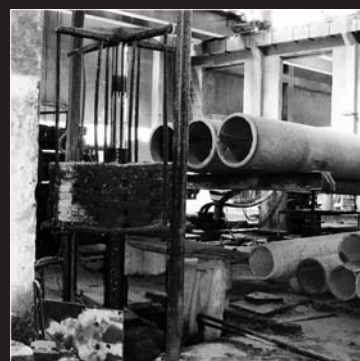


SELLING DEATH Most of Canada's output is for export, mainly to developing countries, principally India, Thailand and Indonesia. Canada's pro-asbestos lobby faced stern criticism in May for wrongly implying a long-delayed and still unpublished government commissioned report opposed a ban on asbestos. Here, an Indian worker with no protection cuts asbestos cloth.

threats



UNION ACTION Like these trades unionists in the Philippines, campaigners worldwide have taken to the streets to demand an end to asbestos trade and justice for victims of asbestos disease.



HARD SELL At the July 2008 world safety congress in Korea, a large delegation from the Russian asbestos industry's Chrysotile Alliance distributed literature claiming "chrysotile asbestos saves lives." But conditions in this asbestos pipes factory in Egypt and many others throughout the developing world are anything but safe.

Photos: BWI

Four Action Areas

1. Address the global industry marketing campaign by asbestos producing and exporting countries, led by Canada.
2. Address importing countries on alternative materials and the need to reconvert the asbestos cement industry
3. Protect workers (and other users) from exposure to asbestos
4. Promote the rights of those affected by exposure to asbestos

UNION PRIORITIES Fiona Murie of the global building unions' federation BWI spells out the union argument for a global asbestos ban and better jobs for displaced workers.

Key contacts

International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS)
http://ibasecretariat.org
Ban Asbestos Canada
www.bacanada.org
BanAsbestos.us
www.banasbestos.us
BWI www.bwint.org
Hazards
www.hazards.org/asbestos