NEWSLETTER
Newsletter from the Asbestos Institute
For safe and responsible use of chrysotile

Number 2, August 2002

Trade unions vision in regard to chrysotile

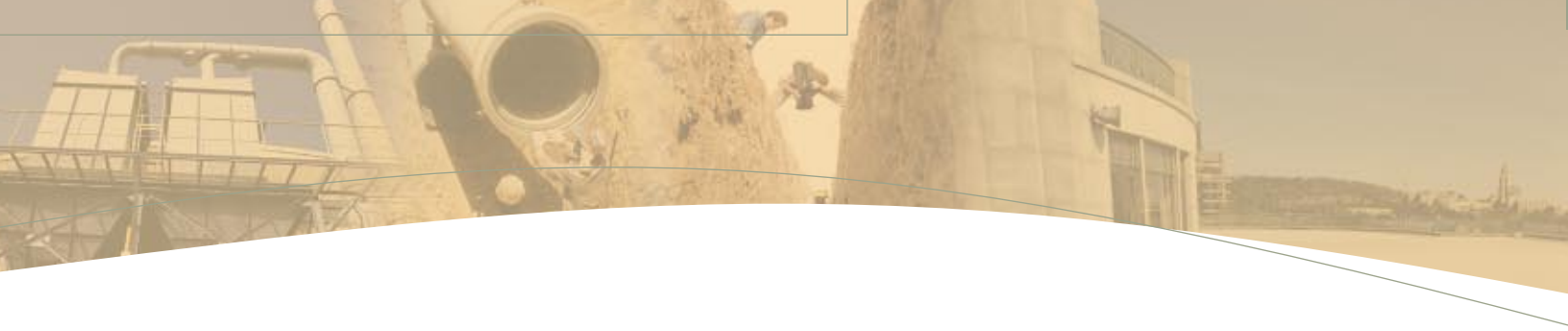
A large number of organizations representing workers in mines, manufacturing facilities and the construction sector, in daily contact with chrysotile fibres or products containing chrysotile, recognize the principle of "controlled-use" as being a tool ensuring the health and safety of their members. Of particular importance is an event, which followed a 1997 international conference in Montreal, where representatives of workers from some 15 countries, endorsed the principles stated in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 162, which recommends the strict regulation of chrysotile, limits its recommendation of the prohibition to the use of amphiboles and sprayed-on insulation. Workers in the chrysotile industries consider that banning this natural mineral, without taking into account its uses, is unacceptable as it does it nothing to protect public health and does not resolve the problems of the past for the following reasons:

- No studies have demonstrated, or even suggested, that high density and non-friable chrysotile containing products are a real risk to public health;
- Almost all cases of asbestosis, lung cancer or mesothelioma were caused by the use of amphiboles and work practices of 20 to 40 years ago, which have long been abandoned;
- The responsible and controlled use of chrysotile does not entail unacceptable risk.

Workers and their trade unions have long expressed the wish that their work experience with chrysotile be used to benefit their colleagues in other industries using potentially dangerous materials. Quebec unions, among others, demand the implementation of appropriate and efficient work practices, which will enable workers to avoid dangerous levels of exposure to all products and all dusts or fibres that are potentially harmful.

In this edition of the bulletin, you will find the labour movement position as expressed by two important labour unions: the United Steelworkers of America from the Confederation of Mexican workers.

The Asbestos Institute



Ref:
Reply of the United Steelworkers union-QFL on the Asbestos Issue

Mrs Buist:

I acknowledge receipt of your letter raising your concerns regarding asbestos. I thank you for bringing these concerns to my attention, and for letting me know what you intend to do to see that asbestos is completely banned from Canada in terms of production and as well as exports.

First of all, I want to tell you where we stand regarding chrysotile asbestos and its by-products. We have long been advocating the safe use of chrysotile asbestos. We base our claim on many reasons such as:

- As a result of the long and hard battles that have been fought here in Quebec, we have reached a proven safety level in mining asbestos, in manufacturing asbestos, and in using chrysotile asbestos products;
- In addition, these battles have yielded in Quebec, the implementation of a vanguard legislation, control measures, direct on-going actions ensurring the protection of workers and public health and of the environment, including:
    - Prohibiting amphibole-asbestos;
    - Prohibiting friable asbestos material – notoriously dangerous to human health;
    - Demanding that chrysotile asbestos not be substituted with products having unknown health effects;
    - Developing an action plan in managing buildings, which, in the past, were fire-proofed with sprayed-on asbestos.
- Scientific research conducted by recognized specialists and international organizations acknowledge the safe use of chrysotile asbestos;
- Several chrysotile asbestos products (i.e. chrysotile-cement, fire retardant material, brake linings, friction disks, etc.), can be manufactured and used safely;
- The manufacturing of such products, followed by a close monitoring to ensure that health will be protected, can contribute greatly to the development of local, regional and international economies.

It is obvious to us that good safety practices is one of the components we must focus on in order to protect all workers and the general public.

As mentioned above, through the battles fought by the labour movement, for the most part in Quebec, we have been able to ensure safe working conditions in our mines and in our mills. Safeguards and safe working conditions have been implemented and we have worked alongside unions in other consuming countries, bringing them our expertise on the issue. We can say that those who work in the chrysotile asbestos industries today, throughout the world, do so without endangering their health or safety.

We certainly cannot remain silent about the **substitute products**, driven by multinational corporations that have, in the past, produced and used mostly amphibole asbestos in the most reckless way. What these substitute products offer is not very safe today and questions remain unanswered.

Neither are we totally convinced that today the main concern of these large corporations is to protect the health of the workers and the population. Their actions, pressures and the vast amount of energy they devote to the fight against the use of asbestos looks more like greed for huge financial gains than a sudden "compassion" and qualms for the reckless use of dangerous products today and in the past.

Currently, in 2002, these powerful organizations use large quantities of thousands of chemicals, in all areas of production. We must constantly pressure them just comply to standards. We must constantly step-in, and often we must take action before administrative tribunals, because these multinationals are aware of the risks involved when exposed to such products but refuse to invest in fixing the source of such serious dangers.

They continue, for the sake of "competition and competitiveness" to wreck lives and to make thousands of workers sick. And then, they decide that they can make even more profits by moving to countries where they can exploit workers and people, they won't hesitate to cast aside their social responsibilities and abandon hundreds, or even thousands, of people whose only claim is the simple right to a decent living and good health.

Let's look at a few research and analysis statements about **substitute fibres** that are being offered to us and let's take a moment to really think about it:

- These products often are far more expensive, far less durable and have nevery been proven safer than chrysotile;
- Data available on humans come mostly from mortality studies conducted on workers from the industry producing these fibres where exposure levels are generally low;
- Regarding Refractory Ceramic Fibres (RCFs), lung x-rays seem to show excessive pleural plaques and airflow obstructions in smokers who have been exposed to such fibres. Currently not enough time has passed to assess the risk of cancer from exposure to these fibres in humans, but inhalation studies on animals are positive.
- There are little, or no epidemiological data on humans for most of the other fibres, (wollastonite, cellulose, polyvinylalcohol);
- There are too few toxicological data on these fibres making a risk assessment difficult;
- There has been however, evidence of inflammatory reactions in rats exposed to aramid and cellulose fibres through inhalation. Furthermore, cellulose fibres are biopersistent in the rat's lungs.
- Artificial mineral fibres can cause an irritation of the upper airways, the eyes and skin. Such lesions have been mainly described in association with glass wool. It could be a case of mechanical irritating dermatitis, but also an allergic reaction due to some additive (epoxy resins, etc,). Similar phenomena have been described in relation to aramid fibres.
- Considering the lack of reliable information and the small number of publications available on all other substitute fibres, it is even more difficult and complex to assess the toxicity of these fibres on humans.

It is therefore clear to us that such significant unknowns given, our children in 10, 15 or 20 years will probably have to go through the same exercise that we are doing now. It also seems obvious to us that the possible physical **consequences related to an exposure to these substitute fibres** will attest to our present lack of concern if we do decide to immediately demand legislation, control measures and above all, absolute proof that these products are not dangerous.

Banning chrysotile asbestos today will not solve what has occurred in the past, nor problems due to poor industrial practices of past decades. We agree that we still have work to do (especially in the construction area), but given current developments, we can say that we are still, today, on the right track leading to real solutions.

There is a good question for those involved in protecting people's health. How come 1,500 chemicals, mainly industrial, potentially very dangerous to human health, are not regulated as

strongly as chrysotile? For example, what do we do about the potentially cancer causing fiberglass …! glass wool, other synthetic fibres, ceramic fibres, silicon carbide fibres, cellulose, etc…?

Banning is not the answer. Responsible-use and safe-use is, as it is required for all other dangerous products, and there are thousands of them, be they chemical, natural or man-made. Their use must be monitored.

We have undertaken several studies on the use of chrysotile asbestos. We have several documents showing what a mistake a total ban of chrysotile would be. We are against forging blindly ahead in a manner that would be both dangerous and irresponsible.

In fact, imposing a ban is the easy way out. Who could then say? "No more asbestos, no more risks". People don't know that asbestos is a natural fibre found in the air on the whole planet. Human beings breathe these fibres their entire life.

More specifically, any responsible monitoring approach must include a requirement that breathable and biopersistent fibres be subjected to tests to determine their toxicity and must be regulated according to the same efficient and responsible use criteria.

Finally, a global ban of chrysotile, as you seem to advocate, will have devastating impact, on our workers, our members and those of the poorest countries and their populations. We find such a drastic claim quite unacceptable, because it does not solve a far more comprehensive issue. I also would like to draw to your attention the fact, I believe you know well, that our governments will never provide our members and the population who make a living from that industry, transition programs allowing them to effectively retain their purchasing power and their quality of life as Canadians. It has never happened in the past and there are no indications that things might improve in the future.

Anti-asbestos groups have emerged throughout the world and we maintain that, in order to fully understand this issue, we all have the moral obligation to keep an open mind and weigh the many impacts that this will have on workers, their families and on future generations.

We firmly believe that we must fight for the safe and controlled use of chrysotile asbestos and all other fibres in this country and throughout the world. Banning chrysotile asbestos completely is in no way a desirable answer. In this regard, we also wish to work with you to promote health and safety in the workplace.

Best regards

René Bellemare
Responsable for Health & Safety
United Steelworkers of America-QFL-CTC

Employment, Environment and Development

By: Dr. Héctor San Román A.

On 26 August 2002 the World Summit on Sustainable Development will take place in Johannesburgh, South Africa. This has been convened by the United Nations in order to evaluate the progress made since the adoption at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and ***Agenda 21***, also approved at the Rio Earth Summit. By interpreting concerns and world consensus, working towards satisfying fundamental human needs, like the quality of life, and by dealing properly with such concerns, decisions will be made to adopt policy at the highest level in order to encourage cooperation in matters of the environment and development; there can be no doubt that topics like employment, health, drinking water and sanitation, the fight against poverty and the protection of the environment will be discussed.

This Summit, already known as Rio + 10, will bring together an important number of Heads of State and Government ***as well as union delegates***, and non-governmental organizations concerned about the environment and sustainable development.

It took more than a century for the population of the earth to double and go from 1, 250 million to 2, 500 million inhabitants in 1950; however, in a little more than three and a half decades the population figure again doubled, reaching 5 billion in 1987, while today we are over 6 billion and shall be more than 8 billion by 2025.

Such a fast-growing population needs greater quantities of water, food and fuel; more housing and employment, better health, remuneration and education. It will be interesting for those of us who were in Rio de Janeiro in June 1997 to go over what has taken place in the last ten years and note the progress made in the face of worrisome difficulties concerning environment and development.

During the past ten years we have come to realize that no economy or society can prosper in a world suffering from poverty, unemployment and degradation. Today we are convinced that it is impossible to stop economic progress, but we know that it must be channeled in such a way as not to damage the environment. For the past decade the challenge has been to formulate compatible life styles and sustainable development, but at no time did we consider the whims of commerce which would impose bans accompanied by stigmas in order to impose the consumption of certain products whose effects on human health and reproduction were not known.

In the European Union various union organizations promoted the banning of asbestos (all types and in all its forms), even though amphibole asbestos fibers are not the same as chrysotile. There is an historical reason for this. For decades the countries of the European Union, basically rich countries who could afford to spend vast amounts of money on commodities like air conditioning, used tons of the various forms of amphibole asbestos without taking any preventive measures, without imposing any control, and without initiating any preventive health measures, and such irresponsibility led to the loss of life among both the workers and in the population at large.

Asbestos was used "without the least precaution" in, particularly, the shipyards and in the insulation used for air conditioning in public buildings.

Such irresponsible and reprehensible ways of using amphibole asbestos have resulted in incapacitating diseases and deaths in many workers. ***It is important to remember that, at the end of the seventies, the sprinkler installation processes and the use of asbestos in friable form for insulation were prohibited, as was the use of amphiboles like amosite and crocidolite.***

There has been considerable financial investment in research on the different types of asbestos to find out their effects on human health and reproduction and, thanks to strict control, to show that, even in factories, the use of chrysotile is absolutely safe.

Industry and legislators cannot be unaware that, with the support of the Internet and electronic mail, the most intense commercial war has been declared by those groups opposing the use of asbestos in all forms who have, until recently, employed asbestos successfully, but now seem to ignore the fact that asbestos is a natural fiber which has existed since the formation of the planet and that its controlled use is of great benefit, given its low cost and resistance, in bringing sanitation to developing countries. Moreover, this industry creates jobs in the best and most safe of conditions for the workers, and developing countries cannot afford the luxury of eliminating such sources of employment.

All the unions in the world are affiliated with an international organization: for example, the international federation of chemical industries groups workers in the petrochemical industry, which is the industry that produces a great many of the asbestos substitute fibers. Today there is a large body of information available and experiences and opinions are exchanged on this subject that provokes aggravation and anger, often caused by feelings running high. We cannot ignore the fact that millions of workers have already forfeited their health and even their lives, the price imposed by ignorance; no preventive measure was implemented in the face of risks inherent in the industrial processes in which not only asbestos, a natural mineral product, was used, but also other chemical products, mixtures of compounds whose effects on human health and reproduction are still unknown, or that contaminate the environment with dangerous, bio-cumulative toxins.

Chemical products are used everywhere and are a necessary part of the social and economic objectives of the countries of the world; however, more effort is needed to reduce the pernicious consequences of their use on health and the environment. Basic information is lacking even today to determine correctly the risks posed to health and the environment associated with high volume usage of chemical products that together add up to tens of thousands in commerce and industrial processing.

It is estimated that 1.2 million individuals die in work place accidents. If we remember the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, we find ourselves with a daily tragedy proportional to that of September 11 since more than 3,000 individuals die daily in the workplace.

We do not forget that the majority of those who died in the terrorist attack on New York were workers. Neither do we forget that the dust created by the destruction, in Mexico City in 1985, created by the demolition of large buildings, hospitals, hotels and multi-family residences, did not cause any asbestos-related diseases.

The number of accidents that occur in the workplace still increases. Our estimates put the figure at some 250 million per year. Work-related diseases affect about 160 million individuals. However, it is still not known why, in the 1980s, in Matamoros in the State of Tamaulipas, Mexico, there were so many cases of anencephaly among the children of young women with no pathological antecedents, although one coincidence was noted, namely, that all of them had worked during their pregnancies and all had had contact with unknown chemical substances. This was a criminal act of such proportions that the American company responsible disappeared, thanks to the excessive tolerance and apathy of the Mexican health authorities of the day.

Jukka Takala. Director of SafeWork at the ILO, points out that work-related accidents and diseases are a daily disaster that rarely causes concern to the victims.

There is an urgent need to put into place a code of conduct concerning "safety in the use of insulating wools made of synthetic vitreous fibers (glass wool, rock wool and slag wool). Before looking to substitute asbestos by synthetic fibers we should ask ourselves the following question: Is such a process of substitution, replacement and elimination free from danger and can we be sure that there are no dangers to human health and reproduction therein? Agenda 21 advocates that, at the level of international cooperation, we should be sure that environmental policies, including those concerned with health and security, do not become instruments of arbitrary or unjustified discrimination or hidden trade restrictions.

* ***Reduce subsidies that distort competition;***
* ***Ensure that economic and environmental policies support sustainable development.***

In the struggle against poverty, every country should adopt its own program for the eradication of the principal causes of poverty such as hunger, illiteracy, inadequate health care and lack of livelihood.

In the matter of the promotion of health care, we know that about 15 million children die each year from preventable diseases like diarrhea or respiratory infections.

* ***The good health of a community depends upon its socio-economic development in a healthy environment, including the provision of a safe water supply.***
* ***The reduction from 50 to 70% in the rate of infant mortality due to diseases caused by diarrhea in developing countries.***
* ***The meeting of basic sanitation needs in the provision of clean drinking water, plumbing and the safe elimination of solid waste.***

Water

Within the next 25 years the world's population will have increased by 2, 500 million more inhabitants and present supplies of fresh drinking water will scarcely meet the demands of such a population. Those who will suffer most will be those who have always suffered, namely, the populations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Where might water be stockpiled and how might it be transported given the cost of the necessary infrastructure?

Water, a simple molecule with extraordinary characteristics, is much more than a renewable resource; it is nothing less than the basis of life on our planet.

Towards an uncertain future

Given the demographic increase that is expected over the next few decades it is certain that tensions and conflicts associated with access to water will intensify. In the year 2025 some 2,500 million more people than today will have to be supplied with food and water. If the present tendency of a growing inequality between rich and poor continues between countries and within every country, the tensions concerning the distribution of water resources will worsen.

The economic and ecological costs in the construction of new reservoirs will prevent a substantial increase in storage capacity. And herein lies the importance of using asbestos cement products in water piping.

Is not to use asbestos merely unthinking capriciousness? Is it the result of discriminatory practices in the marketplace? By doing so shall we eliminate all past and future risks? Is it not certain that a great part of the deterioration noted in the environment and in human health and reproduction can be blamed on industrialization, production and work?

Are we going to eliminate those products needed in the developing countries where there is a lack of proper sanitation, which in turn causes such a high infant mortality rate? Is it perhaps not relevant to mention that, in the developing countries, "euphemism used to denote poverty", almost 20% of the population suffers from diseases related to unsanitary conditions, because of difficult if not impossible access to clean drinking water, because of high levels of contamination in the atmosphere, and because of the use of toxic chemical products in industry and in agriculture?

Or are we going to find the means to avert the dangers by being realistic, and methodically and with reflection, establish rigorous controls for products and substances?

Those who oppose the use of chrysotile have not considered the great differences between:

* The reprehensible use of asbestos in the past and the safety practices in force today
* Amphibole asbestos and the group of serpentine fibers
* Asbestos used in insulation and by sprinkler and in high-density products
* The high levels of exposure to dust in the workplace 25 years ago and those of today
* The difference in research done on the toxic nature of the substitute fibers compared with the extensive studies carried out on amphibole fibers and serpentine fibers
* The real risks involved in working with substances not subject to controls in comparison with rigorously controlled materials like chrysotile and its products.

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