

TRADE UNION ACTION
ON ASBESTOS IN ASIA

Today, more building workers die each year from past exposures to asbestos than are killed in falls; current hazardous exposures guarantee that an epidemic which has already taken so many lives will continue. As 90% of current asbestos consumption is for asbestos-cement construction materials used in the developing world, building workers in Asia are at serious risk of contracting deadly asbestos diseases. Fiona Murie, the Director of Health, Safety and the Environment of the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI),⁹² is concerned about the continuing vulnerability of construction workers in Asia:

"The vast majority of building workers in Asia are part of the unregulated informal sector; working in appalling conditions, they regard asbestos-cement as just another construction material. They have no masks, protective equipment or training; when they get ill they receive neither corporate nor government benefits. It is urgently needed to stop introducing asbestos into the built environment and to protect workers who may be exposed during maintenance, renovation and demolition activities in buildings that contain asbestos."

Nearly 20 years ago, the BWI designated a global asbestos ban as a top priority. Since then, BWI action on asbestos has taken place at national and regional levels, at tripartite meetings, in discussions with international agencies and in campaigns with NGOs and other unions; it has addressed 4 key areas:

- ◆ marketing campaigns by global asbestos producers and the role of the Government of Canada in industry-sponsored events such as the 2006 meetings in Jakarta and Montreal;
- ◆ the availability of safer substitutes; evaluations by the WHO-IARC confirm that alternatives such as cellulose, polyvinyl alcohol, p-aramids and polypropylene are safer than chrysotile;
- ◆ the need to protect workers and end-users from hazardous exposures; the ILO Asbestos Resolution passed in June 2006 was a major victory as it clearly stated that there is no such thing as the safe use of

asbestos. The ubiquitous use of asbestos-cement presents a serious challenge to occupational health especially for those workers who cut it, break or saw it, perforate or handle these products;

- ◆ the rights of those affected by asbestos injuries; improvement of medical surveillance for early diagnosis, treatment and compensation.

The growing strength of the BWI's ban asbestos campaign in Asia can be judged by the accomplishments of its affiliates:

PHILIPPINES: On July 4, 2005, the BWI Philippine Affiliates Council took part in the launch of the Philippine Ban Asbestos Network. In 2006, the Associated Labour Unions (ALU), another BWI affiliate, initiated a national asbestos training program and petitioned the President of the Philippines to enact a national asbestos ban. Responding to this request, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (RTD) held a round-table discussion during which the ALU highlighted the lack of: social protection for the asbestos-injured and effective measures for the monitoring and dismantling of asbestos-contaminated infrastructure. During the roundtable, the RTD sought to downplay the call for a national ban preferring to focus on issues such as regulation, utilization and disposal of asbestos, the ALU, on the other hand, ensured that the issues of phasing out or banning asbestos were central to the discussion.

MALAYSIA: In 2004, Malaysian BWI affiliates, including the Sabah-Timber Industry Employees Union, the Timber Industry Employees Union Sarawak and the Timber Employees Union joined in ban asbestos activities on International Workers' Memorial Day. The next year, BWI officials from head office held discussions with the Ministry of Manpower on the subject of a global ban on asbestos and the part the Malaysian Government could play in the regional campaign to achieve this goal. Several affiliates in the sub-region petitioned the Canadian embassies and consulates in Malaysia and Indonesia over Canada's support for the pro-asbestos lobby. On IWMD 2007, the ban asbestos issue was on the agenda of high-level meetings

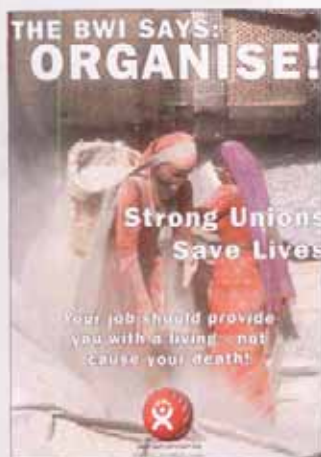
of politicians, trade union officials and representatives of employers' association; it was also the subject of a keynote presentation made at a rally of 1,000 trade unionists at Putrajaya, the new administration center of the federal government.

KOREA: Since 2000, trade unions in South Korea, including the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU), a BWI affiliate, have been lobbying for a national ban. During worksite visits, KFCITU local officers ensure that no asbestos products are being used. When officials from the Chunam-dongbu KFCITU local noticed that asbestos was being used on a site, it sent warning letters to the main and sub-contractors; the companies stopped using the contaminated materials immediately. Although banning the use of asbestos is not part of KFCITU collective bargaining agreements, it is incorporated into occupational safety and health agreements.

INDIA: In October 2006, 17 participants from 8 BWI affiliates⁹³ participated in a seminar on Occupational Health and Safety in Chennai, Tamil Nadu which included discussions on: activities for raising occupational and grass-roots awareness of the asbestos hazard, strategies for developing ban asbestos links with medical associations, plans for a national asbestos conference (2007) and the need to intensify political lobbying at regional and national levels. A presentation made to the meeting by a producer of non-asbestos roofing material underlined the availability in India of safer and affordable alternatives. In November 2006, the "Ban Asbestos Campaign" was on the agenda of the five-day Indian Social Forum.

OTHER REGIONAL AFFILIATES: Throughout 2005-2006, other asbestos events held by BWI affiliates took place in Nepal and Bangladesh.

On April 28, 2006, the BWI and other federations representing labor made the ban asbestos campaign a priority issue on International Workers' Memorial Day (IWMD). In dozens of countries, BWI members engaged in: "peaceful demonstrations and petitions at Canadian Embassies and Consulates to convince the Cana-



dian government to call a halt to its aggressive marketing and promotion of asbestos in developing countries such as India, Zimbabwe and Brazil.”

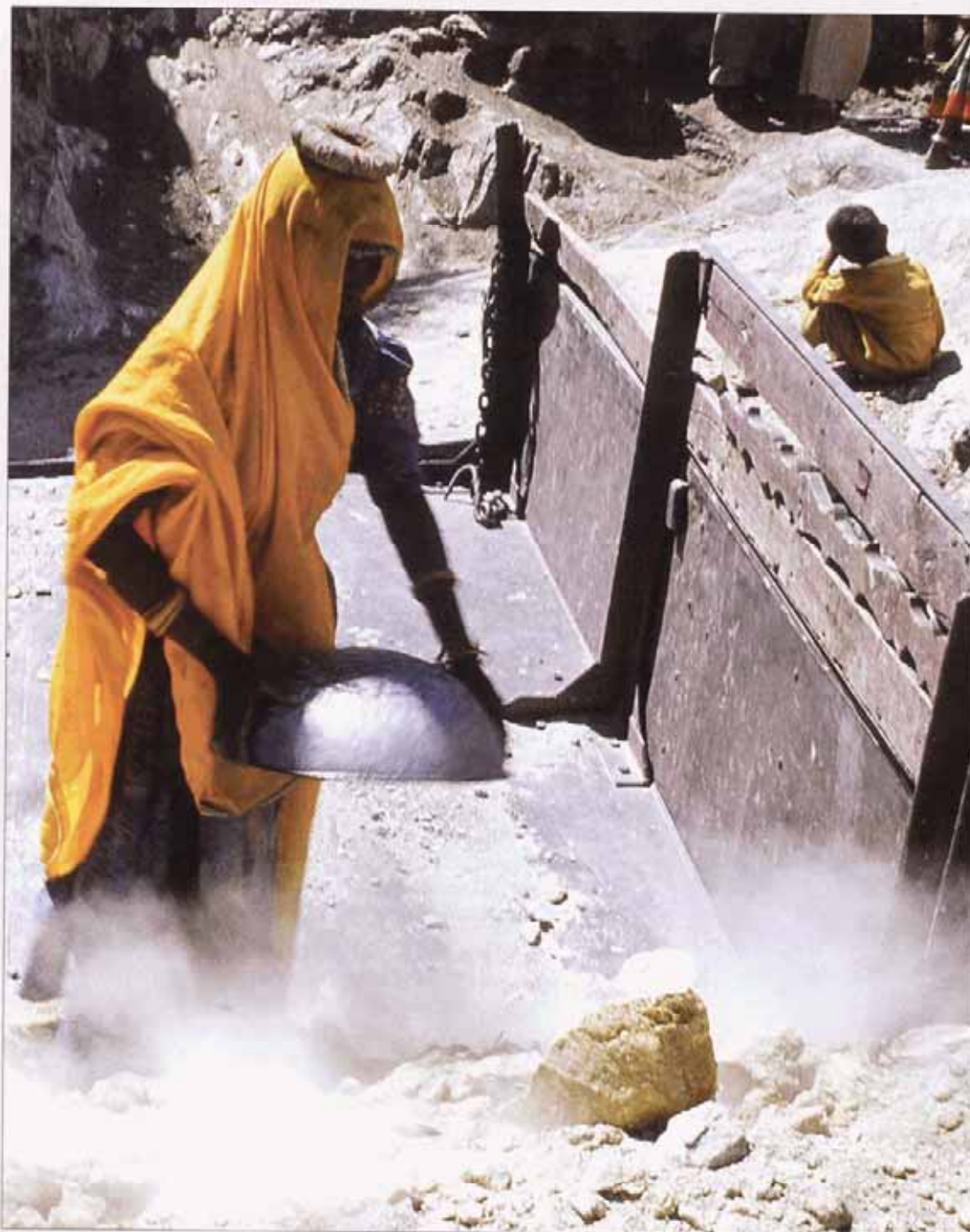
As labor’s theme for IWMD 2007 was Occupational Cancer,⁹⁴ asbestos was on the agendas of high-level meetings, regional gatherings and grass-roots events. Launching the global “zero cancer” campaign in Geneva, Anita Normark, General Secretary of the Building Workers’ International, said:

“Occupational cancer is the most common work-related cause of death, ahead of other work-related diseases and accidents, but it is not taken seriously by regulators or employers. Asbestos alone accounts for an estimated 100,000 deaths each year. While our global campaign to ban deadly asbestos is gaining momentum, much more needs to be done to prevent exposure to asbestos which is already present in millions of buildings and workplaces all over the world.”

The BWI’s *Cancer in Construction and Timber Fact Sheet* warns of the hazards posed by contaminated products hidden within national infrastructures:

“For asbestos which is already installed in buildings, asbestos management plans should be prepared, supervised and adhered to. Employers should know where asbestos is in their premises, and should ensure a record is kept and workers are informed of its presence if there is any possibility it might be disturbed. All work with a potential asbestos exposure should be undertaken only by properly trained and protected workers. Dust levels should be kept as low as practicable. Workers should be provided with appropriate health surveillance and all exposures should be recorded in an asbestos register.”⁹⁵

The provision of detailed information on the BWI website about safer substitutes for asbestos in roofing, pipes, storage tanks and guttering reinforces the argument that in the 21st century, there is no justification for the use of asbestos.⁹⁶



“The vast majority of building workers in Asia are part of the unregulated informal sector; working in appalling conditions, they regard asbestos-cement as just another construction material. They have no masks, protective equipment or training.”

Fiona Murie, the Director of Health, Safety and the Environment of the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI)