

Ban Asbestos Canada

April 28th is a special day for workers in Canada and across the globe. In 1985, Canada became the first nation to establish an annual day in recognition of workers who have died on the job. Now, some 20 years later, in spite of the intense activities of trade unions, and thousands of health and safety activists, Canada continues to have one of the highest rates of injuries and fatalities in the industrialized world. The continuing increase in workplace-related deaths is due primarily to asbestos, which accounts for almost 70% of the increased numbers of workplace fatalities since 1996 in Canada. For the first time, occupational disease, primarily cancers due to asbestos, account for over half of all annual compensated fatalities amongst Canadian workers.

The demonstration in front of the Canadian Embassy in Washington is extremely important as part of the global effort to ban asbestos. By demanding that the Canadian government stop its continued support for the asbestos industry American trade unionists and public health activists are helping to prevent cancer and save lives. In 2002 Canada exported over 90% of its production to more than 60 countries in the developing world while its own domestic use was severely curtailed. The Canadian government has continued exerting diplomatic pressure on behalf of the asbestos industry; funding legal challenges to having asbestos banned, as well as, providing national and international political support to the industry. These actions have even included sabotaging the United Nations' treaty to prevent the export of hazardous substances without informing the receiving countries of the possible dangers.

While helping to maintain the global asbestos market, the Canadian government has remained silent at home about the disease burden that is now affecting thousands of workers from one coast to the other. Quebec is now experiencing some of the highest rates of mesothelioma in the world, with an especially high rate among women living in the asbestos mining communities. Ontario and British Columbia have hundreds of cases of mesothelioma diagnosed in the last decade but the majority of cases were not recorded by the provincial compensation boards. Even fewer of the other asbestos-related cancers were compensated. Canada alone among industrialized countries has no public asbestos disease registry and no national discussion about the preventable cancer epidemic that this substance has engendered.

A growing number of voices are demanding an end to Canada's century-long failure to protect workers from preventable asbestos diseases. A national network of trade unions, environmentalists, medical and scientific associations, and victims' groups is emerging with the demand that asbestos be banned and that a just transition strategy be enacted for the asbestos mining communities. As we ourselves are protesting today across Canada the continued government and industry tolerance of workplace injury and disease, we also stand in solidarity with our American brothers and sisters who are also protesting the unethical actions of the Canadian government to sustain a totally discredited industry.

Providing the necessary resources for alternative sustainable economic development in the asbestos mining communities is an absolute precondition to stopping the asbestos disease epidemic in Canada. We also ask that you raise on our behalf the lack of compensation and medical help for Canadian asbestos victims and their families.

Building a world in which equality, justice and human rights prevail is our common goal.

Solidarity Forever!

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