

UPDATE ON BAN ASBESTOS CAMPAIGN

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Presented at Asbestos Seminar

Brussels, Belgium, October 23, 2011

For decades, a global battle has been raging over the public perception of asbestos. In the bad old days, asbestos was highly prized and widely used and had nicknames such as “white gold” and “magic mineral.” Nowadays, asbestos is categorized as the world’s worst industrial toxin. We call it the “killer dust”. The change from magic mineral to killer dust has been the result of years of consensus building by asbestos victims, health and safety campaigners, trade unionists, community activists, politicians, medical and legal professionals and other members of civil society who have reached out not only to the grassroots but also to governments, international agencies and social partners. There can be no doubt that the ban asbestos movement which had for decades lingered on the outer fringes of society has now become mainstream. A brief look at some salient statistics reveals just how much has changed in the first decade of this century.

Changing Asbestos Panorama – 2010 versus 2000

Year	National Bans	Asbestos Using Nations ¹	Percentage of Global Use			
			Asia	Europe	South America	Africa
2000	18	66	47	35	10	6
2010	55	39	64	26	8	-

There has been a 41% decrease in the number of asbestos-consuming countries and more than a 3-fold increase in the number of countries banning its use. An analysis of the timing of national bans is informative.

Implementation of National Bans

Period	Years	National Bans Adopted	Number per Year
1982-1991	10	8	0.80
1992-2001	10	15	1.50
2002-2011	10	32	3.20

In the last decade, the number of national bans adopted exceeded those achieved over the previous twenty.

Shifting Perceptions – How Did this Happen?

For decades, vested asbestos interests maintained a stranglehold on national asbestos debates, in some countries they still do. Raising public awareness of the asbestos hazard

¹ Only countries using more than 500 tonnes of asbestos a year were included.

required redefining the questions being asked and the voices being heard in these debates. In democratic countries, the only thing which changes government policies is public pressure. That asbestos has been banned in 55 countries owes much to the collaborative efforts of asbestos victims groups, trade unions, NGOs, and members of the global ban asbestos community. Since 1999, the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat has worked with social, political and trade union partners on ban asbestos initiatives on 6 continents. During this time we have learned several important lessons

Observation 1: No one ever gave asbestos victims anything they didn't fight for.

No national government and no negligent employer ever voluntarily compensated those who had been injured by asbestos. Nor did they offer to provide state of the art medical treatment to the victims. As a consequence of the universal neglect by political and social establishments, those affected by the asbestos plague had to extract every benefit, every concession, every medical improvement and every penny of compensation bit by bloody bit. In the UK we have been engaged in this process for more than 40 year; and we are still fighting.

Observation 2: Wherever progress has been made or rights been obtained, they will be attacked.

A few days ago was the 20th anniversary of the overturn of the United States ban on asbestos. The ban was reversed as a result of judicial action by the Federal Government of Canada, the Province of Quebec, Canadian asbestos stakeholders and other vested interests. The overturn of the U.S. ban came at a huge cost to the industry – employing heavy weight lawyers in Canada and the US, political consultants and public relations lobbyists over a ten year period does not come cheaply. Unfortunately, the price paid by innocent human beings who, as a result of the ban's reversal, have been exposed to asbestos has been much higher. In years to come, there will be many asbestos-related deaths in America as a result of the overturn of the asbestos ban. What happened to the US ban has a relevance that transcends national borders. The court action which succeeded in reversing the 10 years of work which had gone into formulating the US asbestos phase-out law was one of the first legal actions taken by the asbestos lobby.

We all remember what happened when the French government banned asbestos – in an effort to overturn that ban, the Canadian Government brought a high-profile case at the World Trade Organization. The asbestos stakeholders lost the case, but even so they bought valuable time during which more asbestos was sold and more disinformation was spread. The lies and propaganda spouted by asbestos vested interests continue.

Observation 3: Wherever people battle the injustice caused by asbestos, you can be sure that asbestos victims are leading the way.

The most effective weapon in fighting the multinational asbestos lobby is the voice of the victims; wherever victims groups have organized, change has come. Indeed it is the victims' groups which have been responsible for asbestos bans in many countries and for the implementation of legal, judicial and administrative changes which have improved

the circumstances of many of the injured. We pay tribute to the victims and their loved ones and affirm that our commitment to the struggle is as strong as ever. Tomorrow the long-awaited court case brought by the family of Francois Jonckheere against Eternit will begin. We are gathering together in Brussels today to pay tribute to her memory and to assure her family of our support.

Eternit has been responsible for a worldwide epidemic of asbestos-related disease and death. The Turin and Brussels trials are testament to the determination to hold this negligent corporation and its executives to account for the decisions which prioritized corporate profits over occupational and public health. Even as we demand justice for Francois and her family, we reaffirm our commitment to end the global use of asbestos. The struggle continues.