



Media Release

Geneva, 15 June 2022

Russia violates Fundamental Right to a Safe and Healthy Working Environment

Just four days after all ILO Member States took the landmark decision of adding the principle of a safe and healthy working environment to ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and by this decision committed to respect and promote this fundamental right, the Russian Federation, supported by a small group of other countries¹ once again blocked a decision to list chrysotile asbestos in the Rotterdam Convention during the ongoing 10th Conference of Parties (COP). This means that for millions of workers around the world, particularly in the Global South, working in the building, shipbreaking and other sectors the prior informed consent mechanism foreseen by the Rotterdam Convention for highly hazardous substances will continue not to be applied in the case of chrysotile asbestos and also for a number of other substances, where the blocking of listing by very few Parties is equally continuing, much to the frustration of a large majority of Parties attending the COP. This despite of the fact that the scientific body of the Convention, the Chemical Review Committee (CRC), has been recommending the listing of the respective hazardous substances for years, in the case of chrysotile asbestos since 2006.

The refusal by certain Parties, led by the Russian Federation, to allow the listing of chrysotile asbestos in the relevant Annex III of the Convention is driven by economic interests and stands in gross violation of the spirit of the Rotterdam Convention and in total contradiction to the decision taken at the International Labour Conference last Friday by *all* ILO member countries, including those now blocking progress at the Rotterdam Convention COP, to elevate a safe and healthy working environment to a fundamental principle and right to work.

According to ILO and WHO, more than 200'000 workers die every year of diseases which were caused by the exposure to asbestos.² WHO also estimates this one substance is responsible for approximately half of all global occupational cancers. It is expected that this figure will further increase, if those countries where asbestos is not yet banned, do not immediately ensure that all workers are fully informed about the deadly risks posed by this highly hazardous substance and if strict measures to protect workers are not taken now. Even if quick action were taken, the world will struggle with the asbestos legacy for decades to come. To continue to refuse to the *Right to Know* about the asbestos threat to workers and communities around the globe is not only cynical and short-sighted, but it now also constitutes a gross violation of a fundamental human right.

A global coalition of more than 30 trade unions and civil society organisations in an [open letter](#) again called on all Parties to the Rotterdam Convention to list onto Annex III of the Convention, all CRC recommended hazardous chemicals and substances blocked until now. They are dismayed that such a decision today again was blocked by a small group of Parties. They demand that the vast majority of Parties who share this dismay and frustration now move swiftly to join forces and take the

¹ India, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Zimbabwe

² Chrysotile asbestos, a well-known hazardous carcinogen, is recognised as the cause of more than half of all occupational cancers. It has been recommended for listing by the Chemical Review Committee (CRC) since 2006. Yet the listing has been blocked by a small group of Parties ever since. Chrysotile asbestos is the only form of asbestos traded in recent decades and is recognised broadly as responsible for the vast majority of the estimated 209,000 deaths each year attributable to occupational exposure to asbestos (WHO/ILO joint estimates of the work-related burden of disease and injury, 2000-2016: global monitoring report).

appropriate steps to modernize the Convention so that these blocking tactics by a small number of Parties, which are totally undermining the Rotterdam Convention, are stopped, latest by the next COP.

Owen Tudor, deputy general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) said: “Now that a safe and healthy working environment has become a fundamental right for working people, government signatories to the Rotterdam Convention must recognize reality. Chrysotile asbestos kills, and there is no justification for continuing to hide its fatal impact. The deadly trade in asbestos must be stopped to protect future generations. Trade unions around the world are stepping up our campaign to make sure the industry pays the price of continuing to use asbestos, rather than workers and their families.”

For further information please contact one of the following:

- Liam O’Brian, Assistant Secretary, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU): +61 405 609 728, lobrien@actu.org.au
- Bernhard Herold, Solidar Suisse, +41 79 599 69 33, bernhard.herold@solidar.ch
- for French speaking media contacts: Lionel Frei, Solidar Suisse, +41 79 472 71 42, lionel.frei@solidar.ch