

Canadian Government defends export of asbestos to poorer nations

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The Canadian government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, with the acquiescence of the opposition Liberals, has played a major, if not the pivotal, role in keeping chrysotile asbestos off a United Nations list of dangerous substances—the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.

The fourth meeting of the signatories to the Rotterdam Convention, held in Rome this week, decided that chrysotile asbestos will not be subject to restrictive measures applied against dangerous exported products for at least another two years. The proposed measures, whilst not banning overseas chrysotile shipments, would have required importing countries to give prior consent acknowledging that they are purchasing harmful materials. Even this mild provision was too much for Canada's government. Canada is the world's second-largest exporter of chrysotile asbestos.

The Rotterdam Convention discusses the shared responsibilities of different countries in relation to international trade in hazardous chemicals, such as pesticides and industrial chemicals. At past meetings, under Liberal and Conservative governments alike, Canadian representatives worked might and main to veto the addition of chrysotile asbestos to the Informed Consent List, arguing, against scientific evidence, that the mineral can be used safely because the chrysotile form of asbestos is less carcinogenic than other varieties.

Despite requests from various concerned parties including doctors and scientists in the days leading up to the Rome meeting, the Canadian government refused to reveal what position it would take on the listing issue. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, it worked to have proxies from poorer nations do its bidding and oppose adding chrysotile to the Rotterdam list.

Thus, when chrysotile came up for discussion at the Rome meeting, a Canadian delegate did not make a speech in its defense. But several countries that import asbestos from Canada—India, Pakistan, Vietnam and the Philippines—made

known their opposition to chrysotile's inclusion on the Informed Consent List.

"Canada got others to do their dirty work for them," said NDP MP Pat Martin, who was an observer at the Rome meeting. "The first speakers were our biggest customers."

In the end, only 7 or 8 countries out of 120 at the Rome meeting opposed chrysotile's inclusion on the Convention list. But the small opposition bloc was enough to prevent its inclusion, since the Convention's rules require that any additions to the list be approved by consensus.

Canada's opposition to adding chrysotile to the Consent List was further underscored by its vetoing of a Swiss proposal to change the ratification process so a three-quarter's majority rather than unanimity would henceforth be sufficient to list a dangerous chemical.

The UN World Health Organization has identified asbestos as a human carcinogen and reports that each year there are at least 100,000 preventable asbestos-related deaths from such diseases as lung cancer and mesothelioma, a particularly severe and aggressive cancer that develops in the lining of the lungs. Exposure to the substance occurs when toxic asbestos fibers are inhaled or ingested into the body.

The government's role in protecting the carcinogen has created significant controversy, within Canada and internationally. In the week prior to the Convention, the *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* made a scathing attack on the Conservative government, accusing it of having become "an avid asbestos cheerleader" for its actions to protect the asbestos industry and maintain asbestos exports to developing countries. This criticism has been supported by two other medical journals, the U.S. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* and a British journal, the *Annals of Occupational Hygiene*.

The *CMAJ* accused the government of "shameful political manipulation of science" and compared the asbestos industry to arms traders. The authors made the argument that the government was taking part in a "death-dealing charade" for its suggestion that chrysotile can be safely used in the developing world. The authors also accused the government

of suppressing for six months a report from an expert panel, commissioned by Health Canada, into the risks associated with chrysotile use. Presumably, the government refused to release the report because it refuted industry and government claims that the dangers associated with chrysotile use have been exaggerated and that the scientific data is inconclusive.

The editor-in-chief of the *Annals of Occupational Hygiene*, Dr. Trevor Ogden, who was a part of the expert panel, excoriated the Conservative government for its "secrecy" and contempt for the "best evaluation of science." "I can only attribute it," he said, "to the fact that Canada doesn't want [the report] interfering with their position on the Rotterdam Convention." The journal noted that "sources tell *CMAJ* the blockage is in the prime minister's office."

The *CMAJ* editorial revealed that the government has provided funding of more than C\$19 million to the Chrysotile Institute, a Montreal-based group that lobbies to support the industry. The lobby group has significant ties with the labor bureaucracy. It is headed by Clément Godbout, ex-head of the United Steelworkers union in Quebec and a former president of the Quebec Federation of Labour (QFL/FTQ). Godbout has been on the Chrysotile Institute's Board of Directors since the Institute's creation in 1984 and in 2002, three years after retiring as the president of the QFL, became the Institute's president.

A former top union bureaucrat who was ostensibly charged with protecting Canadian workers from the dangers of asbestos, Godbout unabashedly places the defense of asbestos industry profits before the health and safety of workers.

Chrysotile asbestos is widely used in building materials and accounts for some 94 percent of global asbestos production. While asbestos use in Canada has plummeted because of health concerns, two mines located in the province of Quebec and employing some 700 workers continue to produce chrysotile asbestos. Ninety-five percent of their production is exported almost exclusively to poor Asian countries, where occupational health and safety regulations are either non-existent or not enforced.

According to Natural Resources Canada, Canada sold approximately 175,000 tons of the mineral worth approximately C\$112 million dollars to 80 nations in 2006. Last year, sales declined to C\$77 million, an indication of an industry in decline, due at least in part to the growing awareness of the hazards associated with chrysotile use.

The *CMAJ* has called for a complete ban on asbestos production in Canada, its mining and export. "For Canada to export asbestos to poor countries that lack the capacity to use it safely is inexplicable," says the editorial. "But to descend several steps further to suppress the results of an expert committee, pour millions of dollars into an institute

that shills for the industry and oppose even (listing asbestos on the UN watch list)...is inexcusable."

The *CMAJ* was attacked by the right-wing *National Post*, which defended the government's position and supported the mining corporations. The *Post*, in the best traditions of the anti-science Bush regime in the United States, accused proponents of listing chrysotile of practicing "medical imperialism" and argued that "the science is still too immature to apply the precautionary principle to chrysotile asbestos." Of course, one had only to read a little further in the newspaper's diatribe to see the real crux of the argument—to place the material on the Consent List would increase the costs of regulatory compliance for the industry.

However, not all editorials in the mainstream press have been supportive of the industry. Some editorialists have realized that the defense of a relatively small section of the mining industry pales in comparison to broader questions of "national interest." As the *Ottawa Citizen* stated, "Canadians need to recognize that this export revenue comes with a price, as measured in the damage to our international reputation."

In the face of overwhelming medical evidence of the harm to human health caused by asbestos, the government and union bureaucracy continue to defend the voracious profit drive of the Canadian asbestos industry. This is done with complete disregard not only for the health of Canadian workers, but for the health of workers from poorer nations across the globe.



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