

A letter on Canada, South Africa and deadly asbestos

1 November 2008

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to the article, “Canadian Government defends export of asbestos to poorer nations.”

Thanks for the article on the Canadian government’s determination to prevent the asbestos mineral chrysotile from being placed on the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.

Chrysotile along with crocidolite and amosite are the three main commercial forms of asbestos, and all have conclusively been linked to mesothelioma, a painful and incurable cancer that affects the lungs of people who have inhaled asbestos fibres. It is notable that the dangers of asbestos have long been known. The Greek geographer Strabo and the naturalist Pliny the Elder observed that slaves who wove asbestos into cloth often suffered from a lung sickness. Scientific evidence linking asbestos to lung disease was already established in the 1920s, and well documented by the 1930s.

The asbestos industry and the Canadian government have attempted to promote the notion that chrysotile (an asbestos mineral from the serpentine group) is somehow less harmful than the other forms of asbestos. The fact is that the risk of developing lung cancer from chrysotile is very similar to that of crocidolite and amosite, with the exception of the mining and milling process. Some of the difference may be due to the presence of larger fibre bundles during the milling and mining process, which are easily counted but not readily inspired. Nevertheless, there is still a sufficiently high risk of developing lung cancer from the mining and milling of chrysotile to cause concern.

The real risk from chrysotile emanates from textile production process where the individual bundles are opened up, producing an environment with a greater percentage of individual carcinogenic fibres that are not easily counted, but are readily inspired. It should be noted that with chrysotile mined in Canada, textile production takes place in poorer countries in South America, Asia and Africa. More than 40 different studies have shown that the risk of developing cancer from chrysotile is similar to that of amosite on a per-fibre exposure basis.

The ruthlessness of the asbestos mining industry in their drive for profit is well illustrated in the case of South Africa. In the early years of asbestos mining, the excavation of asbestos (which lies near the surface) was carried out mainly by families, including children. The main British-owned asbestos-mining companies in South Africa, Cape and Gefco, did not begin constructing commercial mines until the 1950s. Up until then, small-scale production by working class families (often seeking to avoid the vicissitudes of labour migrancy) formed the core of the industry. Cape and Gefco avoided commercial risks by ceasing to buy from small-scale producers when the market declined or prices fell. Thus, the workers bore the costs of “deadmining.” This allowed Cape and Gefco to profit handsomely from the labour of impoverished small-scale producers, especially during the Second World War. In 1938, Cape had capital assets of £589,000, and by 1950, these assets had increased to £4 million.

With the advent of commercially operated mines, the isolation and poverty of the workers, combined with the collusion of the South African state, allowed British mining companies and South African regulatory authorities to enforce horrific conditions in the asbestos

mines. In the 1960s, regular outbreaks of pellagra and scurvy occurred on Cape mines, and well into the 1980s, child labour was used. Cape and its subsidiaries avoided the costs of dealing with asbestosis and mesothelioma by simply sacking workers as soon as they fell ill. Workers at South Africa's chrysotile mines, located near the Swaziland border, suffered similarly. Untold thousands of South African workers died painful deaths from asbestos-caused lung cancer.

Although asbestos mines were closed down in 2002, a deadly legacy still exists in the form of hundreds of unrehabilitated tailing dumps mostly in the Northern Cape, but also in Mpumalanga province and Limpopo province. Because of the long period between exposure to asbestos dust and the development of mesothelioma (up to 40 years), untold numbers of people will continue falling ill and dying of asbestos-related lung cancers far into the future. The South African government has allocated a paltry budget of R100 million (about £550,000) to the rehabilitation of asbestos mines. Enormous areas of the Northern Cape have been rendered hazardous to human health.

EG

South Africa

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