

Mourning the Dead, Fighting for the Living

Absence of Ban on Asbestos Is Tip of the Iceberg for the Need to Ensure Workplace Safety

On the occasion of the International Workers Memorial Day for Dead and Injured Workers, one must remember that under wages that are never sufficient, workers are doubly burdened by unsafe, hazardous working conditions.

The case of workers under a Korean-owned construction firm in Subic, for instance, underlie the oft-ignored responsibility of the private sector and government agencies to enforce and monitor work safety standards.

And nowhere is the issue of workplace safety and health more obscenely demonstrated than by the fact that to this day an undetermined number of houses, buildings, workplaces and materials in the Philippines is laden with asbestos, a substance long known to be carcinogenic and unsafe at all levels of exposure. Yet little has been done to raise awareness on this chemical product, and less so, have any measure lived up to truly eradicating this silent menace in the country.

Historically, we have been living with asbestos for a long time. According to a study conducted by the National Lung Center in the 90s, a lot of the office buildings erected after World War II and even eight housing government projects built in the 50s made use of asbestos-containing roofing materials. In 1995 the Department of Environment and Natural Resources promulgated the Chemical Control Order for Asbestos, but to this date the public is yet to be made aware of the real extent of exposure workers and the general public have endured all these years.

We lament the continued lack of information and knowledge made available to the public on how much asbestos is really present in our buildings and materials. The broad ranks of construction workers, plumbers, insulators, carpenters, pipe fitters, electricians, auto mechanics and sheet metal workers who work for meager wages are unaware that somewhere out there may have been a building they worked on in which asbestos was used or construction materials such as cement, roofing and pipes, or in spray coats for insulation, etc. they worked with.

There are no safe levels of asbestos exposure – none at all. This product has to be monitored, its presence and use disclosed, and ultimately banned.

The Associated Labor Unions (ALU), Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) and Building and Woodworkers international (BWI) together with the Philippine Trade Union Ban Asbestos Campaign stress that no amount of wage hikes can suffice if workers pay for their jobs with their lives.

Besides, the right of workers to seek redress through their legitimate representatives, the unions, should also be upheld. Unions should be able to negotiate Collective Bargaining Agreements which contain clauses on workers' safety and health concerns, and where asbestos use is found at the enterprise level, workers must be guaranteed the right to demand compensation and restoration. Unions have the capacity to advocate and push for such protections, and the right therefore to join one, must be in turn respected.

As the world remembers the International ~~Workers Memorial Commemoration~~-Day for Dead and Injured Workers, we call on the progressive realization of good occupational health for all workers, for it is not enough that jobs are made available, and decent wages are assured. The whole package of workers' rights demands that workers also be allowed to work in safe environments.

The numbers are scary: 2 million women and men die each year worldwide as a result of 270 million occupational accidents and 160 million new cases of occupational disease, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and World Health Organization (WHO). Workers who suffer from sickness and injury also tend to lose their jobs, and with no health care, are often left

to fend for themselves. This neglect exacerbates workers' suffering and contributes to ever-increasing poverty.

The frameworks for upholding workplace safety are not lacking. The ILO has enforceable standards on occupational health and safety that governments should observe. Upholding such standards is not an option – they are a responsibility.

Further, the ALU, TUCP and BWI believe the best way that the memory of workers who have died can be respected is to make sure that further deaths among workers are reduced and avoided. We stress that organizing themselves into trade unions and allowing workers to collectively bargain remains the most efficient means to ensure that safe working places are secured.

The ALU, TUCP and BWI further call on closer cooperation and more decisive response from government and the private sector and allowing more participation from trade unions and civil society to help each other address the problem of asbestos through a National Program on the Eradication of Asbestos-Related Diseases. To do this the following steps have to be taken:

- Banning the importation, manufacture, processing or use of all types of asbestos and asbestos-containing products;
- Certifying as urgent the bills in both Houses of Congress seeking the ban on asbestos ;
- Identifying companies engaged with and expose workers to asbestos;
- Facilitating medical check ups and surveillance and building of list of workers exposed to asbestos;
- Respecting and following the guidelines set in ILO Convention 162, which outlines measures to minimize asbestos prevalence and use and does not in any way condone the continued use of asbestos;
- Upholding and observing recommendations of the WHO Global Plan of Action On Workers' Health for 2008-2017 for improvement of workers' welfare in their workplaces; and
- Supporting the conduct of a survey on health and working conditions of workers.

With the active participation and cooperation of all stakeholders, the elimination of asbestos and the improvement of workplace safety anchored on respect for trade union rights can ensure that not only will the dead and injured workers' lives be ultimately and appropriately commemorated. It will ensure that lives will be saved.