



Confédération des Travailleurs du Secteur Privé

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BAN ASBESTOS IN MAURITIUS

For more than 2 decades we have been struggling for a complete ban of asbestos in Mauritius. In 1999 one of our member namely Mr Claude Marguerite died of a mesothelioma. We applied before the Supreme Court to exhume the corpse and to proceed with an asbestos fibre count in the lungs of late Comrade Marguerite. At that time we benefited from the support of Prof. Hasselton from Manchester University for the count. We also benefited from the support of Dr Pravin Oogarah, a specialist in cancer, and the former student of Prof. Hasselton.

The outcome was shocking, in a piece of 10 grams of the lungs, 86,000 particles of asbestos was detected in the left lobe of the lung. At that time Paul Berenger was the Minister of Finance and he agreed to support us in our claim. The first move was the amendment of the Consumer Protection Act to ban all importation of raw asbestos fibres and the second move, at our request, a commonwealth expert in asbestos Mr John Addison was called by government to conduct a survey on asbestos in Mauritius.

In 2001 the report was tabled to government and same till now has never been rendered public. We managed to get a copy from Mr Addison directly as we deponed in the process of the survey. All successive government till now have not dared to render the report public because the content of same will be too damaging for them.

Some of the outcome, 3113 houses built in 1962 after Carol cyclone as social houses contain panels made with a mixture of cement, blue and brown asbestos. Many public buildings contained asbestos even till now, some of these are the Emmanuel Anquetil Building as insulating and lagging materials, Victoria Hospital as roofs top and many public schools.

Paradoxically in almost all the places in the private sector where asbestos were found namely sugar factories and other manufacturing units all asbestos have been removed and replaced by other less hazardous materials.

In 2004 after nearly 5 years of fierce struggle the then government acceded to our request to introduce a Dangerous Chemicals Act. Surprisingly the Board that is supposed to enforce same has a dozen representative from Ministries, one academic from the University and one representative from the Private Sector but no representative from trade union.

According to section 27 of the Act, asbestos is a prohibited chemical and as such no person shall import, manufacture, use or possess a prohibited chemical. However under the same section "if the Board issue a written authorisation", all prohibition can be waived.

Up to now asbestos fibres were banned under the constitution through the Consumers Protection Act and under the Dangerous Chemicals Act, through the Dangerous Chemicals Board. On the 2nd June 2015 the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Consumer Protection, after getting the GREEN light from the Minister of Health, proceeded with the amendment of the Consumer Protection Regulations and waived ALL restrictions for the importation of asbestos fibres. This entail that our protection under the Constitution is no longer in force.

We are now left in the hands of the dozen Board Members of the Dangerous Chemicals Board to decide whether THEY will prohibit asbestos fibres or not. This is UNACCEPTABLE. Everyone knows what influence a Minister or any member of Government can have on a public officer.

This decision of government to waive ALL constitutional ban on asbestos make Mauritius the first country in the world who has reverted back on such an important decision. All this because the Minister of Finance in his recent budget has decided that all red tapism should be waived to facilitate business and attract investors even if it is at the cost of the lives of workers and citizens of our country.

We have no other alternative the struggle must continue at our risk and peril, we will not leave any stone unturned on this issue. We will use all means be it at both national and international level to fight for our life and safety.

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For the CTSP