

The ILO position on safety in the use of asbestos

1. The ILO position on asbestos is governed by the international instruments (relevant Conventions and Recommendations, and International Labour Conference resolutions) adopted by the Organization, as well as ILO codes of practice. These international instruments provide solid legal bases as well as practical guidance for comprehensive preventive measures at the national and enterprise levels in order to protect workers and prevent asbestos-related diseases.

2. The ILO Asbestos Convention, 1986 (No. 162), provides for the measures to be taken for the prevention and control of, and protection of workers against, health hazards due to occupational exposure to asbestos. Key provisions of Convention No. 162 concern:

- replacement of asbestos or of certain types of asbestos or products containing asbestos with other materials or products evaluated as less harmful,
- total or partial prohibition of the use of asbestos or of certain types of asbestos or products containing asbestos in certain work processes,
- measures to prevent or control the release of asbestos dust into the air and to ensure that the exposure limits or other exposure criteria are complied with and also to reduce exposure to as low a level as is reasonably practicable.

3. The Occupational Cancer Convention, 1974 (No. 139), provides for the measures to be taken for the control and prevention of occupational hazards caused by carcinogenic substances and agents. Key provisions of Convention No. 139 concern:

- periodically determining the carcinogenic substances and agents to which occupational exposure shall be prohibited or made subject to authorization or control;
- making every effort to have carcinogenic substances and agents to which workers may be exposed in the course of their work replaced by non-carcinogenic substances or agents or by less harmful substances or agents;
- reducing the number of workers exposed to carcinogenic substances or agents and the duration and degree of such exposure to the minimum.

4. A Resolution concerning asbestos was adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 95th Session in 2006. Noting that all forms of asbestos, including chrysotile, are classified as human carcinogens by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), and expressing its concern that workers continue to face serious risks from asbestos exposure, particularly in asbestos removal, demolition, building maintenance, ship breaking and waste handling activities, it calls for:

- the elimination of the future use of asbestos and the identification and proper management of asbestos currently in place as the most effective means to protect workers from asbestos exposure and to prevent future asbestos-related diseases and deaths.

The Resolution also underlined that the ILO Convention on Safety in the Use of Asbestos, No. 162, should not be used to provide a justification for, or endorsement of, the continued use of asbestos.

In light of the instructions of the Governing Body following the Resolution, the Office has been:

- continuing to encourage member States to ratify and give effect to Conventions Nos. 162 and 139;
- promoting the elimination of the future use of all forms of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials;
- promoting the identification and proper management of all forms of asbestos currently in place; and

– encouraging and helping ILO member States to include measures in their national programmes on occupational safety and health to protect workers from exposure to asbestos.