



WORLD FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

Class oriented - uniting - democratic - modern – independent – internationalist!

Athens, October 30th 2013

OPENING SPEECH BY THE WFTU GENERAL SECRETARY CDE GEORGE MAVRIKOS AT THE WFTU INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFERENCE ON ASBESTOS

Dear colleagues and comrades,

It is our great pleasure to welcome you here at the seat of the World Federation of Trade Unions, in Athens, for this important international initiative of the WFTU on Asbestos. We are happy to have you with us today, despite financial and other difficulties the trade union movement internationally is facing. Allow me to welcome you, on behalf of the leadership of WFTU.

These days the WFTU has many important activities in all continents:

- In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, trade unionists from over 20 countries took part in the World Congress of TUI Metal and Mining of the WFTU.
- In Malaysia on October 25, 140 trade unionists from 14 countries of Asia took part in the annual regional meeting of Asia – Pacific Region.
- On 28 - 29 October, at the European Parliament in Brussels, education workers from 16 countries participated in the International Trade Union Conference of FISE and discussed critical and contemporary issues of education, students, parents and education workers.
- In Gabon, on 25-26 October all members and friends of the WFTU from the French Speaking Africa took part in the conference which established regional office of WFTU based in Libreville.

Dear colleagues,

- In a few days 8 to 10 November in Latin America, in Montevideo, the annual meeting of young workers union members of WFTU will be held.

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- Vietnam will host after a few days the International Seminar on the role of collective bargaining. And many more activities in every corner of the globe.

The WFTU, the class oriented trade union movement is getting stronger step by step, striving to build unions which will be real weapons for the interests of the global working class.

First of all, we should have, clear that the capitalists and the bourgeois state (as a collective capitalist) seek to continuously increase the exploitation of the working class. They know very well what Marx has shown us: that "the increase in the value of labor power represents a drop of surplus value," a reduction in their profit. So they try, especially during periods of compression of their rate of profit, to reduce that part of the social product that goes to the working class: either directly in the form of wage labor, or indirectly in the form of contributions or expenses for health and safety measures. Businessmen and big contractors weigh the life of the workers against the cost for taking safety measures and they always choose what will give them more profits. The scales are almost always leaning against the life and health of the worker.

In this effort, the bourgeois state is not a neutral observer, but through legislation it creates and implements, through the state budget and through the operation of its own government services, supports actively the side of monopolies.

The issue we are discussing today, asbestos, is a very important issue that affects the health and safety of workers not only in the construction industry (where this material has been used extensively), but all sectors, since its use during the previous years in all countries of the world had and still has an impact on the health of all people. Asbestos keeps being present in many places where working class and their families work and live. Even in countries where the use of asbestos is now banned, there are still buildings, tools and machinery containing asbestos, as its removal requires money. In a number of developing countries, asbestos not only has not been banned yet, but

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continues to be extracted and used because of its low cost and lack of alternatives. Besides, for capitalists and a number of capitalist countries it continues to be a source of profit.

It has been proven - and for that matter I believe that the rest of the speakers and the specialists invited will speak more extensively- that asbestos causes a number of malignancies and diseases leading to death like bronchial cancer , asbestosis , pleural mesothelioma and other health problems . The diseases caused by asbestos often do not appear immediately after contact with asbestos. So, many times the problem is not immediately apparent, and many buildings are "ticking time-bombs" for public health and for those who live and work there. Asbestos has won thus the nickname "silent killer". There is no harmless Asbestos, and many times measures taken to limit its impact, have been proved inadequate.

So when asbestos has been used in buildings, machinery, transportation, tools, and even consumer products, we understand what dangers cause this to public health. Let's think about how many millions of kids come every day in contact with this dangerous material when they go to school, how many millions of construction workers, sea workers, workers of asbestos mines come into contact with this material in large quantities while doing their job often without the necessary security measures, how many families have undergone extensive asbestos exposure, living in houses for whose construction has this dangerous material has been used or living in areas near asbestos mines.

Even when the consequences of the use of asbestos and human contact with it were obvious and scientifically proven, there was reluctance to abolish its use by governments and international organizations. We cannot examine this issue without having in mind the economic and political context in which we live today. Under conditions of international domination of capitalism, when economic growth is planned to be in favor of the capital and the multinational corporations when the exploitation of workers deepens, the hygiene and safety of workers and the population is neglected. The use of asbestos in a number of countries may have been banned. In developing and poor countries, however, it has not. This shows in a more realistic way the inequalities caused by the capitalist development at global level, as workers

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in the poorest countries, countries that have been exploited by imperialism and its policies in the worst way, they continue to live and work in worse conditions of health and safety. This is a fact that should be taken seriously into consideration.

In countries where the use of asbestos was supposed to have been completely banned, many risks remain, as the "silent killer" is still present in many public buildings and other places, who are not registered, and control mechanisms are non-existent or unable to manage the removal of asbestos from those facilities and prevent unauthorized use and sales of asbestos-containing materials. Still, the removal of asbestos from buildings and facilities has been undertaken by private companies, which in order to ensure higher profits neglect the health and safety of the workers working for them, while caring little about the effects of asbestos dismantling operations to the general population and the environment.

Finally, big risk remains, since the population has been exposed for decades to asbestos-containing materials, while the implementation of health and safety measures is still not satisfying the modern needs requirements.

The risks from the use of asbestos and other hazardous materials are even greater when we consider the fact that huge part of the world's population has every time less access to health services. Public health systems in all countries of the world are being privatized or degraded significantly when capitalist governments implement a series of measures that transform health from a public good into an expensive commodity from which the capital and multinationals gain multimillion profits. This fact, essentially, deprives large masses of workers and poor people from the right to fight against health problems, which were caused by the same voracious activity of capitalism.

What is the role of Trade Unions in front of this situation? The class oriented trade union movement, the movement that recognizes that there are no common interests between workers and employers, between the exploiters and the exploited, and has been struggling and must continue to struggle for the protection of the health and the life of the workers, demand modern health and safety measures. So, we should examine the positions of the class oriented trade union movement in this context.

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Dear colleagues,

The WFTU and its affiliates in 5 continents have dealt extensively with issues of health and safety at work and struggle daily so that these measures be respected, implemented and modernized. Employers' and governments' negligence on job health and safety issues (security measures, presence of doctors in workplaces, etc.) is a crime against the working class.

Especially for asbestos, the labor movement has an obligation to demand full registration of asbestos contained in public buildings and facilities, that the state takes measures for the care and support for victims of asbestos and their rehabilitation. Also, strict implementation of the ban of asbestos (in countries where it is banned) and the universal ban of use of asbestos-containing materials and their replacement with safer ones, no matter the difficulties and the cost of doing so, should be in our orientation.

The positions of the WFTU for a public, high quality, free and accessible by all health-care system, public and free social security is an integral part of the struggle of workers to protect their lives by phenomena such as the effects of asbestos we are discussing today. These requests cannot be seen separately from the daily demands of the working class movement for salaries, pensions and working conditions that meet the current needs of the working class and the people.

Colleagues and comrades,

The main cause of the problems described above is the capitalist profit, the unrestrained activity of capital, the international monopolies and the multinationals. The history of the international labor movement has shown that the struggle for the life and health of workers, the struggle for modern workers' rights is a struggle that results in hard conflict with employers, the capital and the capitalist governments. This kind of struggle is able to bring achievements that will ensure a better quality of workers' and peoples' lives, it gives perspective on a way of development, where the economy and science will work in favor of the real producers of the wealth the workers- and not for the monopolies.

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The WFTU based on its class, internationalist and anti-imperialist policies adopted since its establishment in 1945, will continue to struggle along with its affiliates in 5 continents for modern workers' rights, that meet needs of the workers and protection of the health and the life of the working class and their families. With these thoughts, I wish you every success in your discussions and conclusions.

Thank you.

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