

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1196/09
by Willy Meyer Pleite (GUE/NGL)
to the Commission

Subject: Total ban on the use of asbestos

Article 12 of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises that everyone has the right to enjoy physical and mental health. The right to health obliges States to create conditions in which everyone can live healthily.

Millions of workers and consumers in Europe and across the world are exposed to asbestos. Diseases caused by asbestos fibres are among the most serious of all occupational illnesses. Worldwide, almost 100 000 people die each year from diseases linked to asbestos, more than 54% of all deaths caused by occupational cancers.

Under Directive 1999/77/EC¹ adapting to technical progress for the sixth time Annex I to Council Directive 76/769/EEC on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to restrictions on the marketing and use of certain dangerous substances and preparations, asbestos was to be banned throughout EU territory by January 2005, with the deadline for asbestos used in electrolysis installations being extended to January 2008. Nevertheless, the Commission is currently proposing, through Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 (the REACH Regulation²) to extend the derogation for the use of diaphragms containing chrysotile asbestos based electrolysis cells.

We can see no reason for this decision, other than giving way to pressure from the lobby organised by undertakings with a stake in the matter. This is the criticism voiced by trade unions, medical associations and associations representing people who have been affected, who argue that economic criteria have been given priority over scientific criteria and the inalienable right to health and the protection of workers at their workplace.

1. Does the Commission have any new scientific data to support the decision to prolong the use of asbestos?
2. Does the Commission believe that the handling of this toxic and carcinogenic substance, that is responsible for the deaths of around 100 000 workers each year, is compatible with European legislation on health and hygiene at work?
3. Does the Commission not believe that its role, as an institution committed to defending human rights, should be to promote a total worldwide ban on asbestos?

¹ OJ L 207, 6.8.1999, p. 18.

² OJ L 396, 30.12.2006, p. 1.