

Address by ACTU Assistant Secretary Michael Borowick
ACTU-Cancer Council Asbestos Summit 2012, Sydney
Tuesday, 4 September 2012

The ACTU is joined here with you again today at this, the Second Asbestos Summit.

I welcome all of you here not to celebrate any victories, but to mark the progress we have made dealing with the grim legacy of asbestos here in Australia.

And it was a grim task indeed that we set ourselves at that first Asbestos Summit in 2010. When we declared that: ***Our aim is to eliminate asbestos-related disease and exposures to all forms of asbestos in Australia.***

Well that was our aim then and it remains our aim today.

We set that aim in 2010 and we stick with that aim today. We stick also with our demand that Australia to be asbestos-free by 2030.

Why is this?

Well, it is timely today to remind ourselves of who we are and why we are here.

Who we are is unionists, support group members and sufferers, scientists, academics, local government councillors and even, I'm told a few lawyers.

We are here because there is ***a trail of asbestos***. A trail of asbestos dust that lays across Australia. And a trail that lays not just across Australia but across the 'developed world' and a trail that is more and more encroaching and being forced onto unsuspecting populations in developing countries in other parts of the world.

The trail of asbestos dust leaves a grim legacy indeed.

It is a trail that we have seen go across multiple jurisdictions. It is a trail that does not respect borders, boundaries or jurisdictions. It does not respect government departments and does not respect the lives of workers, their families, their children, their neighbours.

This is a trail that has taken fathers from their children.

A trail that has taken daughters from their mothers, husbands from wives. Everyone taken by an asbestos disease is somebody taken from someone.

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The trail of asbestos - we know the damage it does to us, our colleagues, our communities and our families, but where is the stuff? Where is asbestos in Australia today?

Well it is in our workplaces. We know this.

It's in hospitals. We know that.

It's in our schools. We know this too.

But it's even in our homes. We knew this...

But we are only just starting to contemplate the reality of what this means. Home renovators are starting to present with asbestos diseases.

That seemingly simple Australian past-time (or some would say obsession) of renovating a house has exposed many to the **killer in our home**. The killer has gone beyond the workplace and into our home.

Asbestos is becoming the hidden killer in our homes. Geoff Fary's report highlights this when he refers to the *"research revealing that death arising from asbestos exposure will continue to increase and that such increases will often be due to exposure in the domestic environment."*

This is the third wave, which others will talk more about today.

I want to return though to one strand of this trail. This asbestos trail. I want to return to asbestos in our schools.

It is clear that asbestos is in many, if not most, of Australia's schools. Now, the asbestos trail, wherever it goes, diminishes the value of an asset. So our schools have a huge burden of reduced asset value that they needlessly carry.

But the real point here, the real problem is that it's **our children** in our schools!!! And you know, a few things about kids:

- They are shorter than us.
- They are therefore closer to the ground – where dust tends to be.
- They run around more.
- So they stir up dust more than us.
- So they inhale dust more than us.

And in schools, where asbestos has not been removed, this can spell trouble. Maybe not now. But maybe in 20 years time, when our kids are partnering up, or when our daughters are having their first child, or their second, or taking a step up the career ladder, or ... so many more things... We can **not** let this happen.

It is our youngest, our children, our most vulnerable, that may be those most at risk.

I do not want to stand at a future Summit and talk about the '5th wave' – our children of today.

This will not happen.

The union movement, at our very core, is about saving lives. Saving the lives of workers, their families, their children.

We are about saving lives – not about costing a human life.

So this trail, this asbestos dust trail, will stop.

This Report by Geoff Fary gives us so much hope. Geoff talks about *"setting a target date for the removal of all government and commercial buildings and structures."*

Let's do that. Let's agree to that as a nation.

Let's put our children's schools at the top of that list. Let's start by making all government-owned schools throughout the nation asbestos-free. And let's invite all other schools to follow what would be such a great step.

If we don't support these recommendations and don't campaign to ensure they are taken up, the asbestos dust trail will last for future generations. But it is a trail that will stop.

We will stop this trail of killer asbestos dust.

This is the leadership issue of our generation. It is a challenge to all governments. To all industries.

Not here in this space – vacate it for someone who can work to lead us to an asbestos-free Australia by 2030!

Comrades, members of asbestos victim support groups, Minister Shorten, thank you for gathering here today with us. Cancer Council of Australia, thank you for once again joining with the union movement in co-sponsoring *Asbestos Summit 2*.

We will stop this trail of killer dust.

Media contact:

Rebecca Tucker ph (03) 9664 7359 or 0408 031 269; rtucker@actu.org.au