

Canadian Embassy in Manila declines meeting union leaders on asbestos

Manila, Philippines – “The Ambassador has other commitments throughout that day and he will not be able to attend the event or meet with your representatives. He sends his regrets,” was the reply of the Embassy of Canada on the letter of the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), Associated Labor Unions (ALU) and Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) inviting or requesting for an appointment with the Ambassador to receive the statement pushing for asbestos ban and urging Canada to stop mining and exporting asbestos during the International Commemoration Day (ICD) on 28 April 2010.

“Canada supplied 93% of Philippines asbestos imports in 2008 alone. Asbestos imports are used in manufacturing various materials and products which expose workers, their families and the public,” said TUCP Education Director Rafael Mapalo. “Will Canada take responsibility for asbestos deaths and diseases in the Philippines? We wanted to know,” added Mapalo.

“Canada must stop asbestos exports to the Philippines. It should not leave the health and safety of workers and their families and the public in the hands of employers engaged in asbestos businesses and the government,” said ALU National Vice President Gerard Seno. “Canadian laws on asbestos are stricter and implementation better than the Philippines’,” added Seno.

“April 28 commemorates the dead and injured workers due to unsafe workplaces. Workplaces around the world must protect workers from health and safety hazards, including from asbestos exposure. Canada should have shown its concern for workers who died or were afflicted with asbestos diseases by accepting the trade union statement on this day,” lamented Apolinar Tolentino of the BWI Asia Pacific Regional Office.

Supporters came in droves

Some 500 workers and other people signed the statement calling for Canada to stop mining and exporting asbestos to the Philippines. The statement also calls for the ratification of ILO Convention 162 on Safety in the Use of Asbestos, fast-tracking the National Program for the Elimination of Asbestos-Related Diseases (NPEAD) and the passage of laws banning asbestos in the Philippines.

The launching of activities five days earlier on 23 April 2010 caught the attention of the public and encouraged more people to sign the statement. The Asbestos Tree – signifying life for the long latency period of asbestos diseases, and death once the disease is diagnosed – at the TUCP main gate along the busy Elliptical Road in Quezon City had to be dressed up every morning to get attention as asbestos messages disappeared every night.

The ICD celebration started with a march of close to 300 people attending a program calling for the ratification of ILO Convention 187 on Promotional Framework on Safety and Health where partners, including the Secretary of the Department of Labor and Employment, the Director of the International Labor Organization Subregional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific, trade union leaders and employers, supported the call to protect workers in their workplaces, including from asbestos.

The day ended with a candle light procession along Elliptical Road and torch lighting under the Asbestos Tree to light the path towards asbestos ban.