Asbestos: The return of the silent killer
Faced with an energy crisis, Europe is redoubling efforts to renovate its building stock but this risks releasing asbestos, a cancer-causing substance, which is putting the lives of construction workers at risk.

In this special report, EURACTIV looks at the state of play when it comes to tackling asbestos in the construction sector and the way forward to protect workers’ health.
As homeowners renovate, Europe’s asbestos debt resurfaces

Trade unionists: ‘We get more and more asbestos-related illnesses’

On the Razor’s edge: how to deal with the threat of Asbestos
As high energy prices encourage homeowners to renovate, the construction sector is confronted with an old foe – asbestos.

Buildings use 40% of the EU’s energy and are responsible for 36% of its greenhouse gas emissions. To tackle this, the European Commission has launched a Renovation Wave, aiming at least to double the renovation rate of buildings, which currently stands at 1% per year.

But scaling up renovation also reveals nasty surprises by releasing asbestos, a cancer-causing substance used in buildings that was banned across Europe in 2005.

Asbestos released during renovation puts at risk the health of construction workers who are instrumental in achieving the Renovation Wave.

In September, the European Commission put forward a proposal to tackle the issue and lower the legal occupational exposure limit to asbestos tenfold.

Still, this is insufficient, according to trade unions. “We want this to be more ambitious. And we need
to be more ambitious,” said Tom Deleu, secretary-general of the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), during an event organised by the association on 17 November.

One of their goals is to limit workers’ exposure to asbestos to 1,000 fibres per cubic metre (m³), 100 times less than the current limit of 100,000 asbestos fibres per m³. The European Commission, meanwhile, proposed a limit of 10,000 fibres per m³.

“Cancers related to asbestos are avoidable,” Deleu stressed. Doing “everything” to avoid them “starts with exposure limits,” he added.

As much as 78% of occupational cancers are related to asbestos, with an average delay of 30 years between exposure and the first signs of disease.

Once stricter limits are adopted, enforcement and use of more accurate measurement methods can begin. And the EU should not use methods that may also apply in Burkina Faso, noted Jukka Takala, president of the International Commission on Occupational Health.

“We want the best technology available for when we start measuring the risks,” Deleu added.

The Dutch have the most ambitious limit value in Europe so it can be done, EFBWW argues.

**Construction workers at risk**

Renovating houses is instrumental in reaching the EU’s climate targets. High energy prices only reinforced the benefits of building renovation, giving a sense of urgency to the construction sector.

“The Renovation Wave is taking place now,” the EFBWW secretary-general reminded, referring to the EU’s 2020 flagship strategy, launched as part of the European Green Deal.

According to Takala, there is a clear relationship between renovation works and cancers related to asbestos.

“A large number of occupational groups will be carrying out work on roofs, heating systems, windows, bathrooms,” EFBWW wrote in a recent op-ed for EURACTIV.

This will likely cause a new spike in asbestos-related victims, which currently stands at 70,000 per year.

“Ninety-seven per cent of the directly affected workers are construction workers and workers from related industries,” Deleu stressed.

Compared to other industries, construction workers are much more likely to work in various EU countries – with a particular trend workers to move from East to West. Therefore, the level of protection must be high everywhere, attendees agreed.

“We heard the call that we need to lobby, we need to talk with the national ministries, with the member states,” Deleu said.

**Commission less ambitious than Parliament**

Asbestos used to be pervasive in the European construction sector.

In tackling the aftermath, the European Parliament has largely taken the initiative. In 2021, MEPs called to expand the list of occupational diseases linked to asbestos, the EU executive decided to delegate the decision to an advisory committee on occupational health and safety.

But one year down the line, not much of the Parliament’s ambition can be found in the Commission’s proposal. While Parliament called to expand the list of occupational diseases linked to asbestos, the EU executive decided to delegate the decision to an advisory committee on occupational health and safety.

The proposed fibre exposure limit appears untenable to workers’ unions. EU countries will be given large discretionary powers in implementing rules, such as asbestos removal strategies, which may cause issues down the line for construction workers who are highly mobile across the continent.
Despite a 2005 ban, cases of asbestos-related diseases are on the rise again, prompting calls from industry and workers’ safety advocates to tighten exposure rules.

Jukka Takala is the former president of the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH). Rolf Gehring is the Political Secretary in charge of wood and occupational safety and health at the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers.

**Interview highlights:**

- Cases of asbestos-related illnesses are increasing despite a ban in 2005
- Asbestos is everywhere: pipes, cars, and ceilings
- Germany is a former asbestos champion, where more than 5000 products contained it
- Because of asbestos’ properties, it continues to see use in Brazil, India, and China

**What are the most common health risks associated with handling asbestos, inhaling it?**
Takala: Of course, buildings, that is roofs, ceilings, floors, walls, as well. Asbestos is everywhere.

Gehring: It is a lasting problem. And if we start the renovation wave, then we will see a peak in terms of exposure.

Knowledge of workers is starting to become a problem, too. Older construction workers 60 or 50 years old, still know about asbestos containing products, while the younger generation don't. That creates a specific problem in the workplace.

Asbestos can be near everywhere. In some countries, they used asbestos containing material as a first layer when creating streets. In others, asbestos cement was used for pipes.

Do you think that EU action is going far enough?

Takala: No, it doesn't go far enough. It's a compromise between those who don't want to do anything and those who want to do something properly, so that we don't kill millions of people in the field.

Gehring: It's far from being perfect. But I will not accuse the European Commission, as it often happens, it is a compromise between different standards on national level. However, the EU needs to regulate much stronger and more comprehensive

Why is it so crucial that EU action happens in the space of asbestos instead of at the national level?

Takala: Europe is the most affected region in the whole world. We have used the most asbestos in the world. Now, countries like China and India use a lot of asbestos. But nowhere is it as common as in Europe. Do we need the EU for this? Yes.

Gehring: When you have a look on all the aspects of asbestos, there is a big chance to learn from each other, and to avoid inventing the wheel twice or running into a dead end street or making mistakes because we can exchange the knowledge.

The implementation of the real good measures, that is something we need to manage on the European level or in a European effort to cooperate.

How come Europe is so heavily invested in or used to be so heavily invested in asbestos?

Takala: Asbestos was used extensively over the last seventy years in Europe, due to its properties as a material. It is both cheap and very heat-resistant.

Gehring: It also relates to the tradition of constructing and the way we are living. I think Germany was the country with the highest number of asbestos containing products, coming up to almost 5000 different products.

How would a framework to limit exposure to asbestos look like?

Takala: I think broadening the scope of awareness is one of the key points. Exposure limits do a lot to raise awareness, which is something that needs to be done now. It was easy to alert everyone for COVID-19, but asbestos has already killed more people.

Can we already observe an uptick in asbestos-related illnesses in the last five or so years?

Takala: Yes, that is exactly what we observe! Every year now, we get more and more asbestos related illnesses, even though the peak of asbestos use is long past. That means that infrastructure containing asbestos, and working on the infrastructure, is exactly the problem.

You're pushing to have asbestos related diseases or sicknesses recognised as part of occupational diseases that affect construction workers?

Gehring: In some countries, you have the restriction that a specific occupational disease is only recognised for specific professions, which is not logical, but it is a reality. All these diseases have to be covered by the European list of occupational diseases (which is just a recommendation), and on national level where it is more stringent.
After the general ban on asbestos, which finally had to be implemented in all EU member states in 2005, the asbestos issue became quiet – too quiet. For a long time, almost all actors overlooked the fact that asbestos is still present in millions of public and private buildings built before the ban and in parts of the infrastructure.

Rolf Gehring is Political Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health at EFBWW.

The trade unions were as well also quiet about the asbestos issue. Then, in 2009, a debate started in the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), inspired by Scandinavian colleagues. This debate led to the EFBWW campaign “Europe 2023- Asbestos free”. The focus of the campaign was and is to
create national action plans within the framework of a European initiative to eliminate all remaining asbestos. This goal is also to be supported by legislative initiatives in the EU's areas of competence.

The EU's climate targets and the related "Renovation Wave" are now acting like a burning glass on the asbestos problem. A large number of occupational groups will be carrying out work on roofs, heating systems, windows, bathrooms, etc. (in addition to the specialised asbestos removal companies). They will all potentially come into contact with asbestos-contaminated materials. There is thus a risk that the currently very high number of annual asbestos victims will once again skyrocket (the Commission assumes a figure of about 70,000 deaths caused by occupational asbestos exposure in Europe).

In this context, the Commission’s proposals on asbestos, presented on 28 September 2022, come late, but they can still curtail the foreseeable catastrophe that will occur if Renovation Wave workers are not well trained and cannot carry out the work in safe conditions and properly. In particular, the Commission has presented a proposal for the revision of the Asbestos Directive (2022/489) and a Communication (2022/488) proposing further asbestos-related measures and initiatives in other policy areas.

The background for the Commission’s initiative is not least the European Parliament’s own-initiative legislative report, which was adopted in October 2021. It is based on a holistic approach and has spelled out which initiatives and legal changes are necessary to increase protection against asbestos exposure and to implement the current state of scientific and technical knowledge in this area. Thus, the parliamentary report is very much in line with the demands that the EFBWW is pursuing with its asbestos campaign.

Central to the Commission’s proposal is the proposed lowering of the occupational exposure limit from 100,000 fibres per m² to 10,000 fibres. Parliament, the trade unions, and, for example, the International Commission on Occupational Health had demanded a limit value of 1,000 fibres m³. Therefore, the lowering of the limit value will continue to play a central role in the negotiations between Council, Parliament, and Commission.

With regard to the Occupational Health and Safety Directive, the European Commission has, in the EFBWW's view, failed to include a number of the amendments proposed by the Parliament. Above all, the training of all occupational groups that may come into contact with asbestos during their work is extremely important.

In the current directive, there is only a reference to the fact that training must take place. The Parliament has proposed an annex to this Directive with descriptions of minimum standards for a) professional asbestos workers and b) all occupational groups who may come into unintentional contact with asbestos. As in the past for other occupational groups (bus and lorry drivers or seafarers), this specification for minimum standards in safety training would have been possible without interfering with the legal sovereignty of the member states in the field of education.

Against the background of current findings in the areas of prevention, technical safety, the screening of asbestos or measurement issues, the Parliament presented a series of concrete proposals for amendments, none of which, however, were included. The Commission describes the Directive as fit for purpose but announces in its Communication that it will prepare guidelines on a number of the amendments proposed by Parliament, thus recognising the underlying problems.

The Parliament’s proposals for other policy areas are also significant. For example, the Commission is requested to present a legislative proposal for a European framework as a basis for national asbestos removal programmes (Annex I). For Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, a stronger emphasis on asbestos prevention is called for. A special asbestos screening is proposed for the Energy Performance in Buildings Directive (2010/31/EU). A legislative initiative is also called for general asbestos screening and a digital register of asbestos occurrences (Annex V).

For the victims of asbestos exposure, Annex III of the parliamentary report proposes to update the European list of occupational diseases to the current state of research, i.e. to include further diseases that have been proven to be caused by asbestos. Parliament has chosen a good time for this, as the European Commission has to a certain extent opened up this list in order to include COVID-19 diseases. The Commission wants to consult the Advisory Committee on Occupational Health and Safety in Luxembourg on this. Further proposals of the Parliament concern the support of asbestos victims and the recognition procedure. The Commission sees no scope for action in this regard, as it is a matter for the Member States.
A number of other Parliamentary demands have been included in the European Commission’s Communication. For example, the Commission announces a legislative proposal for the screening of buildings and for a digital register of asbestos in buildings. The Commission is not considering a legislative framework for national asbestos removal plans but instead calls on member states to use all EU programmes that are open for this purpose. Other elements are described as somewhat settled, such as the proposals concerning Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan.

Asked for a conclusion on the current state of affairs, I would say: the asbestos issue has gained significant recognition after a period of too much silence. The European Commission was already on the way to lowering the occupational exposure limit. The parliamentary report has clearly broadened the thematic consideration of the asbestos problem. A number of items have been taken up with the Commission’s proposals. What quality the implementation of the announced measures will have is open or has to be negotiated.

The proposed limit value is clearly too high from a trade union point of view, and a European framework (coordination) for the removal of all remaining asbestos is missing, as is a more thorough revision of the Occupational Health and Safety Directive. However, the general recognition of the importance of the asbestos problem gives hope that in the further discussions and negotiations the actors will openly and pragmatically seek solutions regarding the controversial issues.
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