

## ASBESTOS

### Union campaign forces tough new restrictions

A union campaign has paid off with the NSW Government announcing asbestos removal conditions to restrict unlicensed contractors.

CFMEU State Secretary Andrew Ferguson said the changes would close a loophole where a standard asbestos fibro home could be demolished without trained workers or licensing.

Under the new regulations the licensing threshold will be cut on September 1 from 200 square metres of bonded asbestos to 50 square metres and by July next year to only 10 square metres.

Ferguson said it was a good victory because “unlicensed demolition contractors have regularly put lives at risk by tearing asbestos fibro homes apart without proper licenses, equipment, training and knowledge”.

Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia vice-president Bernie Banton said the changes had only come about because of the union’s “tireless efforts ... once again demonstrating conclusively the essential role of unions in the community”.

The WorkCover proposal is open for submissions at: [www.workcover.nsw.gov.au/OHS/ManagingSafetyRisks/asbestos-fibro.htm](http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au/OHS/ManagingSafetyRisks/asbestos-fibro.htm)

### Funds for research

The NSW Government has announced \$6.9 million funding for an institute to research asbestos-related diseases at Concord Repatriation General Hospital. It will undertake clinical research into more effective treatment, earlier diagnosis and increased life expectancy for sufferers. Each year about 350 new cases of asbestos-related diseases are diagnosed in NSW, and it is estimated it will be 30 years before the number of new cases begins to fall.



## Canadian asbestos: no!

**Building workers came knocking** on the Canadian Consulate door in Sydney in April and it wasn’t to enquire about the shortage of construction workers the country is facing. Instead with placards and posters, the protesters went to highlight the Canadian Government’s continued support for its asbestos export industry.

Barry Robson, of the Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia, said there were only 1400 people mining asbestos in Canada, but the government would not shut down the industry as it is based in Quebec and it feared it could be used as an issue for that province’s secessionists.

Instead, the Canadian Government has poured money into propaganda campaigns which promote white asbestos (chrysotile) as being safe.

“We are here to tell you it is not,” Robson said.

CFMEU NSW State Secretary Andrew Ferguson told the protest that Canada “a country that bans the use of asbestos on building sites had the audacity to make money out of exporting asbestos to some of the poorest countries in the world where there are no trade unions or OHS regulations to protect workers”.

### What you can do

Ring the Canadian Consulate on 9364 3000 and demand Canada cease mining and exporting asbestos.

Go to the CFMEU website and send an email protest to the Canadian Government. [www.cfmeu-construction-nsw.com.au](http://www.cfmeu-construction-nsw.com.au)

## Book Review

### Asbestos House: The Secret History of James Hardie Industries

**Gideon Haigh’s book is a thoroughly researched** history of James Hardie Industries that traces the company from its incorporation in Australia up to the special commission of inquiry and the negotiations that followed.

The book’s title comes from the name of the building James Hardie built for itself in the Sydney CBD. Awareness of the dangers of asbestos go back to the 1930s, however the book outlines the indifference James Hardie had towards the welfare of its workers, who often worked in clouds of asbestos.

In the late 1960s its chief medical officer at the Camellia plant suggested that “for dusty jobs, James Hardie should employ older men, because the older men will not live long enough for cancer to develop”.

James Hardie did not stop making products with asbestos until the 1980s. Not long after this JH was looking at relocating out of Australia – to escape from its asbestos liabilities. The book outlines the calculating and complex corporate engineering required to achieve this.

In early 2001 JH announced the formation of the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation

with an allocation of \$293 million to cover future claims. However those involved in its establishment knew there would not be enough money.

In one e-mail exchange a senior representative of James Hardie is asked: “What happens when the money runs out?” “It runs out.” “What guarantees can JH give that victims aren’t going to be stranded?” “None.”

By early 2003 it was estimated the MRCF had a shortfall of \$500 million. In 2004 the Carr Government set up the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation. James Hardie was forced to sit down with the unions and victims groups to work out appropriate compensation.

Asbestos House is an important piece of work in reminding us that in this modern era, there are many corporations that have total indifference towards even basic human decency and that trade unions need to be present and vigilant as ever.

— Jennifer Glass

*Asbestos House: The Secret History of James Hardie Industries*  
Gideon Haigh, Scribe, Australia, 2006  
RRP \$39.95