

Media release
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Better protection against asbestos without political partisanship

Some 30 organisations call for the Quebec standard on asbestos to be strengthened without delay

Montréal, February 20, 2018 – An impressive collective of organisations - including unions and professional associations of construction workers, firefighters, architects, asbestos victims, as well as organisations, associations and centres of expertise in the field of health and environmental issues - sent a joint [letter](#) last Friday to the leaders of the four main political parties, urging them to set aside partisanship and agree to speedily tighten the provincial standard for occupational exposure to asbestos. It is to be noted that the standard of 0.1 fibre / ml or less is the standard in most OECD countries and Canadian provinces. However, the Quebec standard is ten times weaker and the government last summer asked a committee of the Standards, Equity, Health and Safety Commission (CNESST) to examine the issue of lowering the standard¹, even though the National Institute of Public Health has since 2003 recommended tightening it to 0.1 fiber / ml².

The current standard is too weak

At a press conference earlier today, the group was accompanied by an asbestos victim, Mr. Yvon Savage, a retired 73-year-old electrician who in 2016 was diagnosed with asbestosis, a chronic lung disease that makes breathing more difficult. "It so happens that I have spent a good part of my professional life installing pipes and wires in ceilings that were insulated with asbestos, including those of the pavilions at Expo 67. Why are we still tolerating today in Quebec that construction workers are exposed to concentrations ten times higher than what is tolerated in other major Canadian provinces? Are the lungs of Quebec workers worth ten times less than those of workers in Ontario, Alberta or 100 times less than those of our cousins in France, where the standard is 100 times lower?" asked **Mr. Savage**.

Asbestos Kills More Workers Than Workplace Accidents

"In 2016, the last year for which we have official data, asbestos killed 121 workers in Quebec, which is more than all other causes of occupational deaths combined, including work-related accidents. A number that increases every year. How is it that our workers are 10 times more exposed than in Canada? This is unacceptable. No one should be exposed to a deadly illness just by going to work," said **FTQ Construction General Manager, Yves Ouellet**.

"My father died of mesothelioma, a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. To see him gradually lose his breath, to see his stamina diminish day by day before my eyes, it still haunts and saddens me," explains **Mr. Gilles Mercier**, whose father, a tinsmith, died last June. Mr. Mercier also chairs the **Quebec Asbestos Victims Association (AVAQ)**.

"I also worked for the CNESST (formerly the CSST) for 35 years as a labour inspector. When I started my career, the standard for asbestos exposure was the same as it is now. I can say that it is easier to intervene with regard to a dangerous machine or a problem of falling from a height which can seriously hurt or kill a worker on the spot rather than intervene on a problem of asbestos, an odorless and invisible fibre whose concentration in the air is unknown, even uncertain. Very few intervenors are

aware that a single exposure to asbestos is too much exposure; it's like buying a lottery ticket for a jackpot that nobody wants to win. Yet, in Quebec, regulations are weaker for certain types of asbestos, indeed much too weak for chrysotile asbestos. Our politicians must act now," adds **Mr. Mercier**.

An unprecedented mobilization

"When we heard the heart-felt cry by the Quebec Federation of Labour-Construction last September, scientists and doctors could not just stay in their offices and health facilities to provide services and advice. What good does it do to try to inform people, to try to cure people who are sick, when, with asbestos, healing is not possible and so we must do more to reduce exposure! Therefore it was important to get involved in this common front to implore our politicians to tighten the standard," said **Dr. Isabelle Samson**, president of the **Quebec Association of Specialists in Preventive Medicine**.

Intervenors from other backgrounds have come to the same conclusions. In addition to the public health directors for the regions of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Bas-Saint-Laurent, Capitale-Nationale, Estrie, Gaspésie et des îles, Laurentides, Laval, Mauricie-et-Centre-du-Québec, Montérégie, Montréal, Nord-du-Québec and Terres-cries-de-la-Baie-James, the collective includes:

- Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment
- Quebec Association of Respiriologists
- Quebec Association of Specialists in Preventive Medicine.
- Association of Firefighters of Montreal Inc.
- Quebec Asbestos Victims Association
- Quebec Medical Association
- Quebec Lung Association
- Quebec Public Health Association
- Centre for interdisciplinary research on well-being, health, society and the environment (CINBIOSE), Université du Québec à Montréal
- Quebec Provincial Council of Construction Trades – International
- School of Public Health, Université de Montréal (ESPUM)
- David Suzuki Fondation
- FTQ-Construction
- Young Doctors for Public Health
- Institute of Environmental Sciences, Université du Québec à Montréal
- Quebec Order of Architects
- Professional Order of Respiratory Therapists of Quebec
- SVP - Société pour Vaincre la Pollution

Call for political diligence and courage

"In the current pre-election context, we are concerned that the issue may be once again politicized to a downwards level. We are calling simultaneously on the leaders of all parties because for too long, decisions related to asbestos have been influenced by a certain partisanship aimed at winning the vote of some constituencies associated with the asbestos mines at the expense of some basic health issues. Now there are fears that some will see projects to process asbestos tailings as a new El Dorado that should be promoted by postponing the tightening of the standards. On the contrary, we believe that all parties should seize the opportunity now available to them to reiterate their commitment to the health of Quebecers by tightening asbestos safety standards as quickly as possible. It is time for action and that action must be without partisanship," concludes **Dr. Louise Soulière**, vice-president of the **Quebec Public Health Association** and former director of public health for the Estrie region.

Source : **Quebec Public Health Association**

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