

11 October 2022



Economics and Industry Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly
Level 1, 11 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

UnionsWA Incorporated • ABN 64 950 883 305
Level 4, 445 Hay Street, PERTH WA 6000
PO Box Z5380, St Georges Tce, PERTH WA 6831
Tel: +61 8 9328 7877 • Fax: +61 8 9328 8132
unionsyes@unionswa.com.au • www.unionswa.com.au

laeisc@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Chair,

UnionsWA submission - inquiry into Western Australia's bilateral trade relationship with the Republic of Indonesia

UnionsWA is the governing peak body of the trade union movement in Western Australia, and the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). As a peak body we strengthen WA unions through co-operation and co-ordination on campaigning and common industrial matters. UnionsWA represents around thirty affiliate unions, who in turn represent approximately 140,000 Western Australian workers.

UnionsWA also has a proud tradition of internationalism through our support of trade union rights. Since the late 1980's, the UnionsWA International Committee has functioned as the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) representative to the Southern Initiative for Global Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR).¹ SIGTUR works with unions in the southern hemisphere - mostly those in developing nations - to share information and act through campaigns to enhance the rights of working people and their unions. We are also proud supporters of Union Aid Abroad APHEDA - the global justice organisation of the Australian union movement.²

UnionsWA, Union Aid Abroad APHEDA, and SIGTUR are jointly supporting the important work of LION (Local Initiative OHS Network) Indonesia which provides support to those with asbestos related disease as well as raising awareness of asbestos use in that country.³ It is because of this support that we are making a submission to the inquiry.

Since 2017, UnionsWA has supported the Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA campaign in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos PDR, and Indonesia to eradicate asbestos. The campaign to ban asbestos, called *Asbestos, Not Here Not Anywhere*, has been built by unions and campaigners across Southeast Asia who are tackling asbestos in their workplaces and communities. They train workers in asbestos safety, educate the public on the dangers of asbestos, and pressure decision-makers to take action to ban asbestos.⁴ The Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, through the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency and the Department of Foreign Affairs and

¹ <https://www.sigtur.com/default/about-sigtur.html>

² <https://www.apheda.org.au/history/>

³ <http://lionindonesia.org/about-us/>

⁴ <https://www.apheda.org.au/ban-asbestos/>

Trade, through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program has been financially supporting the asbestos eradication work of Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA.

Here in Western Australia, the legacy of the Wittenoom mine, and more recent scandals about asbestos turning up in roof panels of Perth Children's Hospital, gives us a particular awareness of the consequences of asbestos use in the Asia Pacific, including the risks associated with trade and importation. UnionsWA argues that Indonesia having imported 86,000 tonnes of raw fibres in 2020 and having around 207 asbestos factories employing thousands of workers – should be a significant consideration when evaluating WA's bilateral trade relationship with that country.

The ABC reported in 2019 that round 10 per cent of Indonesian homes have roofs made from chrysotile – or white asbestos, a carcinogen that can cause cancers including mesothelioma and other diseases. Approximately 115,000 tonnes of chrysotile are used every year, mostly to produce roof sheeting because of its fire-resistance and durability.⁵

More than 75 per cent of total global consumption of asbestos is now in Asia. So, an obvious consideration for an ongoing trade relationship with Indonesia is the need to strengthen enforcement to prevent the importation of products containing asbestos.

However, just as trade with Indonesia is not an exclusive matter for the Commonwealth government, the WA state government can also play a role in actively engaging with stakeholders about asbestos use in the region. This need not work at cross-purposes with a deepening trade relationship, indeed there are opportunities for WA to work with those forces already active in Indonesia fighting against the use of asbestos.

Nations such as Indonesia face enormous barriers to eradicate asbestos as they lack:

- technical and commercial expertise;
- knowledge and awareness of the dangers at all levels of society;
- institutional and medical facilities;
- in-country data and research; and
- the regulatory frameworks that Western Australia and other Australian states now possess.

Overcoming these barriers represent opportunities for WA businesses. The state government could assist this process by actively promoting the use of alternatives to asbestos products, such as Cellulose or Bamboo Fibre in roofing products. Promoting the adoption of ISO standards such as 14001 (for Environmental and Asbestos Waste Management systems) would also be to the benefit of both WA and Indonesia.

These are not speculative opportunities. In 2018, the Indonesian city of Bandung banned asbestos in new commercial buildings and in 2020 expanded their asbestos ban to include all new private houses. In practice, it meant that the city will not approve planning applications with asbestos products.

The Indonesian government has also declared its ambition for the new capital city of Nusantara to be a 'sustainable city'. It is a rare opportunity to build an asbestos free city. Whatever role Australia or WA business plays in the design and planning of the new capital, it must include advocating for

⁵ 'White asbestos lines many Indonesian buildings and health experts fear a coming cancer 'explosion''
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-07/indonesia-is-built-with-white-asbestos/11668864>

the capital be asbestos-free, so that the Indonesian government can fully meet its sustainability ambitions.

However, there is also a powerful and well organised asbestos lobby group actively pushing to expand its market in the region. The Chrysotile Information Centre (CIC), acts for producers in the world's two big exporting nations, Russia and Kazakhstan. Not only has the CIC been determined to block efforts to ban chrysotile in Indonesia and other Asian markets, it also actively promotes white asbestos as a 'safe product'. While local activists, supported in part by Australian trade unions, are resisting these efforts – it would be of immense assistance if the both the WA and Australian governments took a 'Team Australia' approach to actively promoting the banning of these dangerous products.

The importance of 'people-to-people' connections is prized in international relationships. For WA and Indonesia, these might well be based on a common concern for the health and wellbeing of Indonesians imperilled by the widespread use of this dangerous product. These dangers, which we know well in WA, will have a dramatic long-term impact on the health of Indonesians, on their economy, and therefore any trade relationships with WA.

We would therefore urge the Committee to recommend in its final report that the WA government:

- Support local and global efforts to ban the use of asbestos in Indonesia
- Strengthen enforcement to prevent the importation of products containing asbestos
- Promote opportunities for WA businesses to participate in asbestos eradication and support the use of alternative products – including the adoption of stronger international standards on safe materials uses
- Support efforts to resist the regional 'asbestos lobby' which is endangering the health of workers in both Indonesia and Australia, by increasing the likelihood of their using asbestos contaminated products.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. Please contact me directly on 08 9328 7877 or owhittle@unionswa.com.au if you wish to discuss matters further.

Yours sincerely



Owen Whittle

Secretary