

KATHLEEN RUFF

# How we beat asbestos

**A**SBESTOS IS THE biggest killer of Canadian workers. As well as the human tragedy, asbestos continues to be an economic disaster for Canada and other countries who put millions of tonnes of the carcinogenic material in their homes, schools, government buildings and infrastructure. Billions of dollars are now being spent on health care costs for asbestos victims and to deal with deteriorating asbestos-containing materials in our built environment.

The scientific evidence that all asbestos is deadly has been well established for decades. Other industrialized countries banned asbestos years ago. Yet just a few short years ago—in 2012—the Canadian and the Quebec governments denied the scientific evidence and supported the opening of an underground asbestos mine in Quebec to massively increase mining and export of asbestos. Only four other countries were still mining and selling asbestos: Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Brazil.

While the scientific battle had been won, the political battle had not. Public policy at the federal, Quebec and regional level had been captured by asbestos interests. The facts did not matter. The health of workers in Canada and especially overseas (where all the asbestos from the new mine was to be shipped and where safety measures are virtually non-existent) did not matter.

When the Parti Québécois was elected in September 2012, it cancelled a \$58 million government loan that former premier Jean Charest had approved to open the asbestos mine. Asbestos mining in Quebec and Canada then finally ceased. With asbestos mining ended, the Trudeau government banned asbestos as of December 30, 2018.

How did this human and political catastrophe happen? What can we learn so that we might stop other disastrous policies that betray science and democracy?

**A**n important factor in the asbestos story is concern felt for the plight of the asbestos workers and the fact that we as a country do not provide decent economic security and training to workers who need to transition when an industry retracts or closes down. The heroic strike back in 1949 by Quebec asbestos miners against appalling exploitation by the U.S. and English-Canadian mine owners created an indelible legacy of respect and pride in Quebec, which increased the sense of solidarity with the workers now facing the shutdown of the industry.

As is often the case with extractive industries, towns where asbestos was mined tended to be single-industry towns. In some cases, such as Asbestos in Quebec and Cassiar in British Columbia, the mine came first and the town was built around the mine. The power dynamics were clear: the mine ruled the town, not vice versa. If the mine closed down, the town risked disappearing, as happened after the Cassiar mine closed.

Just as it is ecologically unhealthy to create monocultures, similarly it is socially unhealthy and dangerous to create single-industry towns. The community is at the mercy of the vagaries of the marketplace and industry decisions. If the company shuts down, workers not only lose their jobs, but house prices plummet, schools and community amenities close and the younger generation leaves.

Workers, their families and their communities are held hostage in single-industry towns. The workers at the Jeffrey mine in Asbestos owned 35% of the company's shares. They were fighting to save their jobs, their financial investment and their community. The failure of the government to offer a transition strategy meant that the workers and their community were trapped in a desperate crisis with no alternative option but to keep mining asbestos.

Another characteristic of single-industry towns is that they have some political influence. The voters are concentrated in one area and determine who gets elected there. Political parties, motivated by human compassion or cynical self-interest, generally seek to woo single-industry towns by adopting policies that favour the industry. Until just over a decade ago, all federal and Quebec political parties unquestioningly supported the Quebec asbestos mines.

The asbestos companies, the Canadian and Quebec governments and Quebec unions jointly formed an organization, the Asbestos Institute (later renamed the Chrysotile Institute), that for decades marketed asbestos overseas and lobbied against any restriction on asbestos use.

**T**he tobacco industry is notorious for its tactic of funding scientists to deny or create doubt about tobacco harm. The asbestos industry employed the same strategy.

The Quebec Asbestos Mining Association (QAMA) decided in 1965 to seek an "alliance with some university such as McGill, for example, so that authoritative background for publicity can be had." QAMA gave \$1 million to McGill professor John McDonald to fund his studies of Quebec asbestos miners. These funds enabled McGill University to create a department of epidemiology with McDonald as its chair.

McDonald's studies concluded that chrysotile asbestos is "essentially innocuous." No other scientist—except scientists with financial ties to the asbestos industry—has duplicated McDonald's findings. McDonald and McGill refused to make available the data on which McDonald based his findings. Chrysotile asbestos represents 95% of all asbestos ever sold.

McDonald assisted the asbestos industry by opposing stricter occupational exposure standards, stating, falsely, that he had no ties to the

asbestos industry. In 1986, McDonald collaborated with the Asbestos Institute to oppose plans by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ban asbestos. In 1998, McDonald argued before a World Trade Organization tribunal that countries should not have the right to ban chrysotile asbestos. In 1999, McDonald went to Brazil to argue against a proposed asbestos ban.

McGill is influential and provided the asbestos industry with academic cover. McDonald's work promoting use of chrysotile asbestos in developing countries is still cited today by the asbestos industry.

Both the Quebec and Canadian governments refused to heed their own scientific experts. The mandate of the Quebec National Public Health Institute (INSPQ) is to provide expert health advice to the government. It had carried out extensive research and published numerous reports on asbestos. Its recommendations opposed the government's asbestos policy and were disregarded.

The government's 16 directors of public health for every region of Quebec, including the asbestos mining region, publicly challenged their government's policy. They put a media release up on the government's website stating that the government's "safe use" policy was a failure in Quebec and that the government's planned expansion of the asbestos mine would result in an increase in asbestos-related diseases among workers and the general population, creating social and financial costs.

At the federal level, politics overrode science. Former prime minister Stephen Harper was ideologically opposed to any government action that would interfere with the mining industry and vowed he would not allow the asbestos industry to be "discriminated against." Successive Canadian health ministers rejected appeals to fulfil their duty and stop supporting asbestos.

Challenging governments to respect scientific evidence is critical, but it is not enough. In order to mobilize the force of public opinion it is essential to convey the real-life and human dimension of an issue—wherever the impacts are being felt.

Thanks to collaboration between activists in Canada and India, former premier Charest was challenged by asbestos victims while on a trade mission to India in 2010. India was Canada's biggest asbestos customer and the premier was accompanied on that trip by Quebec's leading asbestos exporter. While Charest refused a meeting with the activists, the Quebec journalists on his plane interviewed the premier about it and filmed the Indian workers suffering from asbestos-caused diseases.

The human face of Quebec's export of asbestos became real instead of theoretical. This had a strong impact on Quebec public opinion.

Then in December 2010, again through international collaboration, the Asia-Quebec Solidarity Delegation—composed of asbestos victims, a trade unionist and activists from Asia—came to Quebec to appeal directly to the provincial government, unions and the people of Quebec. They asked the government not to finance the asbestos



Rachel Lee, who died in December 2011 from mesothelioma as a result of exposure to asbestos, is shown demonstrating outside the Quebec premier's office in 2010 with the Asia-Quebec Solidarity Delegation.

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mine and not to export millions of tonnes of asbestos to India and elsewhere.

The delegation was accompanied and supported by Quebec health professionals. Amir Khadir, then leader of Québec Solidaire, presented the Solidarity delegation in Quebec's national assembly and introduced a bill to ban asbestos. Together they sent a powerful message of scientific integrity, international solidarity and political leadership.

It was no easy matter to defeat the asbestos industry. The asbestos lobby had political and social power, received millions of dollars in government funding and employed public relations professionals, lawyers and others to advance its cause. The campaign against the asbestos industry was run with no funds, no staff and no big organization behind it. Still, the asbestos lobby accused the campaign of being funded by powerful, hidden interests and attacked the scientists at the INSPQ as being "a little gang of Taliban."

Government ministers threatened retaliation against the INSPQ. One of the directors of the International Chrysotile Association (still based in Quebec) who works for the Kazakhstan asbestos industry hired a spy who infiltrated the global movement to ban asbestos, including the Canadian campaign, for four years at a cost of more than \$1 million.

Yet in spite of its money, power and dirty tactics, the asbestos lobby was defeated in Quebec. International solidarity involving activists, scientists and asbestos victims played a key role in winning this victory. The willingness of the Quebec health professionals to challenge their government and advocate for public health policy based on scientific evidence and human solidarity provides an inspiring example of what can be achieved when scientific experts are willing to speak truth to power. **M**

KATHLEEN RUFF WAS AWARDED THE MEDAL OF THE QUEBEC NATIONAL ASSEMBLY IN 2016 FOR HER WORK TO STOP THE MINING AND USE OF ASBESTOS. SOME OF THE CONTENT OF THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE EDITED COLLECTION *SICK AND TIRED: HEALTH AND SAFETY INEQUALITIES* (FERNWOOD PUBLISHING, OCTOBER 2018).