

Statement to Berne Declaration press conference, Oct 17, 2006

Paraquat

Sue Longley, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations

Paraquat not only kills weeds, it kills workers, which is why our members, agricultural workers' unions around the world, are committed to its elimination. There are proven, less toxic alternatives.

Paraquat is a non-selective herbicide which kills green plant cells on contact. It is widely used for weed-control in fruit-orchards, on non-agricultural cropland and on plantation crops including coffee, cocoa, oil palm, rubber, bananas and tea. It is also used as a drying agent in the production of pineapples, sugar cane, soybeans and sunflowers,

Palm oil plantations in Malaysia had successfully accommodated their production to the ban. IUF like many others was dismayed to learn that the Malaysian government has decided to temporarily lift the ban on the herbicide paraquat, affective from Nov 1, to allow *"a comprehensive study on its many uses"*.

We are deeply disappointed at this decision as the lifting of the ban on one of the most dangerous poisons in the world has very serious implications on workers and farmers health and rights to safe working environment.

Paraquat accounts for a substantial number of the tens of thousands of pesticide-related deaths recorded annually by the WHO. Paraquat is highly toxic to humans and animals. Once absorbed through the skin or lungs or orally ingested, its effects are irreversible. There is no known antidote to paraquat poisoning. Agricultural workers are regularly exposed to this toxic substance during handling and mixing, spraying and working in freshly-sprayed fields.

Paraquat is persistent and accumulates in the soil with repeated applications. Recognition of its toxic nature has induced several countries to completely ban its use and in other countries it is severely restricted. It has been banned here in Switzerland since 1989.

The world's largest manufacturer of paraquat, Syngenta, acknowledges the highly toxic nature of paraquat but contends that it can be safely used when the prerequisite precautions are used. However, the IUF's experience indicates that these safety measures are often ignored, especially in tropical countries where heat and humidity make personal protective equipment (PPE) uncomfortable for users. Also many farmers do not

provide the necessary PPE to employees and workers cannot afford to buy their own - a pair of protective gloves is equivalent to a day's pay in Kenya.

Agriculture is the world's biggest employer - employing about 40% of the world's workforce. Agriculture ranks alongside mining and construction as one of the three most dangerous industries. Agriculture is also heavily reliant on child labour with 70% of the world's child labour taking place in agriculture alone.

Agriculture is also one of the hardest sectors where rights to join a trade union and protest against working conditions are severely restricted. Recently in Malaysian palm oil plantations over 1000 workers were sacked and 6 union leaders jailed for trying to organise a trade union and to raise concerns about occupational health and safety conditions, including pesticide use.

It is against this background that the IUF is calling for:

1. Paraquat should be immediately prohibited. This is vital in view of the number of fatal poisonings that have occurred with undiluted and diluted paraquat and the inadequate work safety standards due to lack of resources and tropical climates.
2. As poisonings with paraquat at the work place also occur in industrialised countries, paraquat clearly presents a serious hazard to humans and the environment wherever it is used.
3. As long as it continues to be marketed, paraquat's trade should be regulated at the international level within the PIC procedure. A number of countries have already decided to ban paraquat or severely restrict its availability and many companies have prohibited its use in crops they grow or purchase, showing that there are less hazardous alternatives to paraquat
4. Based on its toxicological properties – acutely toxic, delayed effects and absence of an antidote - paraquat should be categorized in WHO class Ia or Ib.. The World Health Organization should reassess the hazard classification of paraquat.