



**Message by Juan Somavia
Director-General of the International Labour Office
on the occasion of
World Day for Safety and Health at Work**

28 April 2009

This year we celebrate the 90th anniversary of the International Labour Organization. It is fitting to recall our founding mission as we observe this World Day for Safety and Health at Work.

Ninety years ago, on 28 April 1919, the Versailles Peace Conference finalized the Constitution of the ILO. This tripartite Organization comprising representatives of governments, employers and workers, was founded on the presumption that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice.” In a world where conditions of labour involved “injustice, hardship and privation” that could produce “unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled” the ILO was charged with the mission of promoting social justice in and through the world of work.

Then, as today, the call to protect workers against sickness, disease and injury arising out of employment has been at the heart of the ILO’s agenda, a major focus of standard-setting and other means of action.

Occupational safety and health is a human right and an integral part of a people-centred agenda for development.

Unsafe work is a human tragedy – a daily anxiety; deepening poverty if ill health or injury reduces or takes away the capacity to work and mechanisms for support are absent; lives cut short. Much of this tragedy involving millions of workers each year plays out unseen and unheard, never making the headlines. Yet so much can be prevented.

All stand to gain from safe and healthy workplaces. Workers and their families, governments, enterprises, societies and economies have a stake in reducing work-related accidents, injury and illness.

Safe work underpins sustainable enterprises which benefit from improved productivity, quality and workforce motivation. And a healthy workforce and safe and productive enterprises are part of successful and sustainable development strategies.

The ILO is observing its 90th anniversary and this World Day at a time of global crisis – a financial crisis, an economic crisis and a jobs crisis. We must be particularly vigilant to ensure that strategies for adjustment and economic recovery do not follow a low road which devalues human life and safety in the workplace. The words of our Constitution, also written at a time of turmoil resonate today – “Labour is not a commodity.” This is why the ILO insists on the goal of decent work covering work itself, social protection including occupational safety and health, rights at work and social dialogue.

With this in mind, let us all assume our responsibilities – governments, employers, workers and their organizations, community-based organizations and local authorities, the multilateral system, and funding agencies, among others – and do our part to make occupational safety and health a global message and a global commitment backed by national action.

From a starting point of respect for the dignity of human life at work, we can bring together normative instruments, tools, knowledge and experience to promote a culture of prevention. We must go beyond workplaces to create increased awareness of occupational safety and health as an economic and social issue and to secure a broad-based mobilization around the goal of safe work. And we cannot forget that the health and safety of workers in the informal economy – who form the majority of workers in many countries – also matters. It is also our responsibility to find effective ways of helping them to work in safety.

On this World Day we can make a common stand for the dignity of human life at work. Work must be life giving, not life taking. Decent work is also safe work.

* * *