

## 28 April : World Day for Safety and Health at Work

### Two million work deaths a year

### Carnage is preventable, ILO says

**One death every fifteen seconds. Six thousand a day. Work kills more people than wars. And it injures and mutilates, too. Almost 270 million accidents are recorded each year, of which 350,000 are fatal. Many of these tragedies could be prevented, the International Labour Organization believes. And yet, twenty years after the Bhopal disaster, which killed 2,500 people and injured 200,000 in the space of a few hours, the situation has scarcely improved.**

by Luc Demaret and Ahmed Khalef\*

Kemerevo, Siberia, 10 April 2004: fatal explosion in a mine, at least 44 miners killed. Background: the Russian mining industry is in bad shape. Due to a lack of maintenance, accidents happen frequently. Jieyan, China, 9 April 2004: electric shocks kill 12 workers and injure three others on a building site after they come into contact with a 10,000-volt cable. Background: between January and October 2003, 13,283 fatal work accidents were registered in China's industry and mines – an increase of 9.6 per cent over the previous year. The rise is particularly steep in the construction sector. Dublin, Ireland, 13 April 2004: a study reveals that hundreds of thousands of workers suffer from stress. Four million working days were lost in 2003, at a total cost of more than 170 million pounds (300 million dollars, 250 million euro).

Prague, 14 April: according to the president of a trade union, a quarter of all accidents, including fatal work accidents, happen in the health sector! In Phnom Penh this February, dozens of workers at a textile plant fainted next to their machines. The premises were badly ventilated and the company was making uncontrolled use of a highly toxic product, trichloroethylene. Background: workers at the factory were regularly putting in two hours more than the permitted working day. These plants are built without taking account of the health risks. At two other factories, labour inspectors were refused access.

January 2004: explosion at the Skikda liquified natural gas complex in Algeria. 27 workers killed. So Algeria's second-biggest oil terminal is not immune from major accidents. December 2003: explosion at a mine in China - 200 dead. November 2003: collapse of a gangway leading up to the liner *Queen Mary 2*, then under construction at Saint-Nazaire in France. 10 dead. And as work nears completion at the venue of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, no less than 154 work accidents have already occurred there. Twelve building workers have been killed. Last October, 600 workers at the Olympic village went on strike in protest over the poor conditions on site.

Work causes injuries, mutilations, sickness and, still all too often, death. Not by fate, but through negligence. Due not to the absence of standards, but to their violation. Not because of

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poverty, but because of the lack of preventive measures. All too often, even today, workers' lives are unnecessarily put at risk. So is the environment. A case in point was Seveso where, on 10 July 1976, a cloud of dioxin escaped from a reactor in a chemical plant and spread across the plain of Lombardy, in Italy. Although nobody was killed, many people suffered the after-effects. Ecologically, the disaster was even more tangible: apart from the 3,300 domestic animals that died of poisoning, some 70,000 cattle had to be slaughtered. And major work was needed to decontaminate the agricultural land and the houses.

### **Six thousand deaths a day**

The International Labour Organization, a UN tripartite agency (governments/employers/unions), estimates that 2.2 million people die from work-related causes every year: 750,000 women and 1,500,000 men. The difference in the figures for men and women is mainly due to the distribution of the two sexes within dangerous jobs. However, as the ILO notes, the large number of women working in agriculture in developing countries makes them particularly vulnerable to work-related infectious diseases. ILO experts also point out that the statistics in any case underestimate the real situation, given the lack of information and reporting in many countries. But by any standards, six thousand deaths a day - one every fifteen seconds - add up to more than the ravages caused by war each year.

Of these deaths, almost 350,000 occur during work accidents. The rest are due to work-related illnesses. Thus, more than 400,000 deaths are caused by exposure to chemicals. Such exposure is also responsible for 35 million of the 160 million cases of occupational sickness recorded worldwide. Every year, one thousand new chemicals come on to the market, and more than a hundred thousand different ones are used each day. Many of them, if handled incorrectly, constitute a hazard. More than 300,000 cancers per year are due to dangerous substances.

As ILO staffers emphasize, "even though there is no such thing as zero risk, work accidents must not be seen as fated. They don't just happen. They are caused." The causes can be many and varied, but they all come down to negligence: by unscrupulous employers who, in the name of profit, begrudge every penny spent on safety; by governments who ratify as few international Conventions as possible and do not give their labour inspectors the means to enforce even those they do ratify; and, sometimes, by workers themselves, usually due to a lack of training and information.

Health and safety in the workplace are the sole responsibility of the employer. Some employers take this obligation seriously and, increasingly, they draw competitive advantage from it in their advertising campaigns. Others seem to put short-term profit before safety.

How else can we explain the fact that millions of workers are still exposed to asbestos, when we know that its fibres kill more than 100,000 people each year? This is clearly down to negligence on the part of certain employers and governments who persist in using this substance (and even, in some cases, singing its praises). Negligence, too, by those governments who appear to be in no hurry to ratify and implement the international Convention adopted by the ILO in 1986, banning some kinds of asbestos. To date, this Convention has been ratified by only 27 of the ILO's 177 member States.

"Asbestos is already banned in 25 countries, but that means that almost 150 other ones are still using it," Jukka Takala points out. He heads the ILO's occupational health and safety work. "Although asbestosis is not an infectious disease, it is tempting to call it an epidemic,"

Takala adds. "This is especially true of mesothelioma, a cancer of the pleura or the peritonium, caused by asbestos. And don't forget that, after a worker has been exposed to asbestos, the disease may take 20 or even 35 years to appear."

### **Thousands of children sacrificed**

Another clear sign of negligence is that every year 22,000 children, who ought to have been at school, die at work. This despite a whole arsenal of international conventions, declarations and legislation.

At the initiative of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the trade union movement has made corporate responsibility one of the themes of its International Commemoration Day for Dead and Injured Workers, on 28 April. The ILO is supporting this event, calling upon its tripartite constituents to observe a World Day for Safety and Health at Work.

"We want to see more serious penalties imposed on employers who violate safety measures," says the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers. Its sectors are known for their dangerous conditions and their high rate of occupational accidents and diseases. Out of the daily toll of 300 asbestos victims, most are in the construction sector.

"We work to live, but work still means death." So says the food, agriculture and allied workers' international IUF. Of the 270 million work accidents recorded each year worldwide, a large proportion are in agriculture. It accounts for more than half of all fatal accidents: 170,000 in 2003. This led governments, employers and unions to adopt, in 2002, a new international Convention on safety and health in agriculture. It would give workers the right to refuse tasks that would put their lives at risk.

Many countries have brought in legislation to tackle the most obviously negligent attitudes to work safety. But the penalties are often derisory. As Jukka Takala emphasizes, "If you let companies with poor health and safety records survive, these will set a bad example and other companies might be tempted to relax their own safety efforts."

And yet, worker health and safety is a good thing for companies. In the US alone, work accidents cost employers tens of billions of dollars. Insurance premiums go up. Compensation has to be paid to victims' families. Workers have to be replaced and the replacements have to be trained. And then there are the consumers, with their growing demand for "clean" products. And productivity goes up in workplaces where effort no longer spells danger. "No successful company can in the long run show high productivity levels with poor safety," Jukka Takala insists. Pressure can sometimes stimulate better safety performance. When retailing giant Walmart told its Asian suppliers that they would have to improve their health and safety standards, they rallied round in no time at all. "Even the smallest supplier in Thailand proved capable of adapting its production to the new standards," Takala recalls.

### **The price of negligence**

Nor is poverty any excuse for holding back on the implementation of safety standards. As a matter of fact, inaction costs a lot more. Expenditure due to occupational illnesses and work accidents (invalidity benefits and compensation to victims' families, medical expenses, lost time etc.) adds up to 4 per cent of the GNP of all the countries on the planet. That is more than a thousand billion dollars, or 20 times more than the public assistance provided to the

developing countries. The industrialized countries must take part of the blame. “In fact,” ILO specialist Takala says, “one of the trends is that industrialized countries are exporting their hazards to developing countries. Labour there is not only cheaper but also significantly less protected. Dirty and difficult jobs are left to the South. That includes mining, of course.” So while the mining diseases commonly known as pneumoconioses, including silicosis, have virtually disappeared in the industrialized countries, they are still claiming fresh victims every day in the developing world. For instance, on current estimates 10 million workers are at risk from silicosis, and the death-dealing dust causes 5,000 fatalities every year. In Vietnam, it is the source of 90 per cent of compensated occupational illnesses. In India, more than two million miners are exposed to this hazard. Plus six million in Brazil and almost two million in Colombia. In Latin America, according to an ILO report for the 28 April commemoration, 37 per cent of miners suffer from silicosis – a figure that rises to 50 per cent for miners aged over 50.

The statistics also show that the social and economic burden of work-related accidents and illnesses is not evenly distributed. Mortality rates in various parts of the Middle East and Asia can reach four times the level of those in the industrialized countries.

Similarly, social coverage for occupational safety and health varies greatly from one part of the world to another. Workers in the Nordic countries have almost universal coverage, whereas only 10 per cent – or even less – of developing country workplaces are covered in any way. In many developed countries, meanwhile, only half the workforce may be covered against injuries and occupational diseases.

### **Boosting safety**

Yet the ILO is convinced that many disasters and everyday hazardous practices at work are preventable. Priority must be given to overcoming them, and ILO standards can help to achieve this. Almost half of the 184 Conventions adopted by the ILO have a bearing on health and safety issues.

Ratification of these standards, i.e. countries’ formal commitment to respect them, is uneven. Some have been widely ratified, such as Convention 81 on labour inspection (130 ratifications). Others, however, have produced less encouraging results. For instance, Convention 155 on worker safety and health has garnered just 42 ratifications.

In addition to these standards, all the available studies confirm that the existence of social dialogue within a workplace boosts health and safety. Where unions are fully recognized and there is a workplace health and safety committee (with equal representation of management and the unions), the serious accident rate may be halved in relation to workplaces where unions are not recognized and no such committee is in place.

Another study shows that, in one country, more than 80 per cent of unionized workplaces had a high level of compliance with safety and health legislation, whereas only 54 to 61 per cent of non-unionized workplaces achieved similar compliance. Union action to promote health and safety must have helped save millions of lives, according to one ILO officer. So it is no surprise that, in 1984, trade unions in Bhopal warned of a disaster in the making. Tragically, their warnings went unheeded. Although trade union freedom is a vital factor in workplace safety, all too often it is still flouted. In fact, trade unionism is a high-risk occupation. And the price to be paid for improving conditions at work is sometimes high. Across the world, two hundred trade unionists are murdered every year.

Although he was receiving death threats, Cambodian union leader Chea Vichea never abandoned his struggle, which secured marked improvements in working conditions for some two hundred thousand women in the country's garment industry. On 22 January 2004, in Phnom Penh, he was killed by three bullets fired at close range.

“Safe Work is not only sound economic policy,” declared UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2002, “it is a basic human right.” Getting that basic right respected everywhere will take some major changes of attitude.