

Editorial

Since their very inception, trade unions have seen the improvement of working conditions as one of their top priorities. And indeed, progress in that field, including a clear decrease in work-related accidents in the industrialized world, the improvement of work methods and recognition of the human factor in industries over the last century, owes a lot to efforts by organized labour.

However, the need for trade unions to promote better working conditions has far from disappeared. Figures appearing in this issue of *Labour Education* are shocking: every day sees 5,000 people die from work-related accidents. That is one death every 15 seconds. Work-related diseases continue to take a heavy toll, affecting at any given time more than 160 million people in both developing and industrialized countries. This is an important issue for all of society, as these casualties help swell the pressures on increasingly stretched public health systems throughout the world. In consequence, the costs and the social impacts on communities have risen.

Statistics will also show that the social and economic burden of this scourge is not evenly distributed. Fatality rates in some European countries are twice as high as in some others, and in parts of the Middle East and Asia, fatality rates soar to four times those in the industrialized countries. Certain hazardous jobs can be from 10 to 100 times riskier in that part of the world. As Jukka Takala, Director of the ILO's programme on safety, health at work and the environment, tells us, agricultural workers are particularly exposed to danger. Out of a total of 350,000 fatal workplace accidents worldwide, some 170,000 casualties are among workers in agriculture. Mining remains unsafe in many places and the construction industry still accounts for 55,000 fatal injuries each year.

Likewise, insurance coverage for occupational safety and health varies widely in different parts of the world: workers in Nordic countries enjoy nearly universal coverage while only 10 per cent or less of the workforce in many developing countries is likely to enjoy any sort of coverage. Even in many developed countries, coverage for occupational injury and illness may extend to only half the workforce.

There is no doubt that poverty is a factor behind weak protection and weak coverage. But, as

most contributors to this issue of *Labour Education* point out, much of the suffering generated by poor health and safety has little to do with the level of development or the economic situation, and could actually be avoided. Preventing work-related diseases and accidents may actually help countries to alleviate poverty, as these accidents and ailments cost an average of 4 per cent of a country's GDP.

Is poverty to blame for companies from the North being allowed to relocate their dangerous production processes to developing countries? How can one explain, for instance, that a number of enterprises in developing countries have, recently and within weeks, proved capable of drastically improving their health and safety records, simply in response to their industrialized country clients' calls for higher standards?

Just as the worst forms of child labour should be done away with immediately, and poverty must not be accepted as an excuse for delaying this, so too the worst forms of exploitation that put workers' lives at risk must be eradicated.

One message above all others is conveyed by contributors to this *Labour Education*: things don't have to be this way. Many of the catastrophes and questionable day-to-day work practices are preventable. Prevention must become a priority. ILO standards can help in this. Over half of the 184 Conventions adopted by the ILO have links to health and safety issues. Some, like the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No.81), the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and the Occupational Health Services Convention, 1987 (No. 161) have become key instruments of ILO policy for the promotion of health and safety. This battery of instruments has been reinforced by the adoption, last year, of the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001 (No. 184). Other instruments dealing with asbestos, the working environment, the prevention of accidents, the use of chemicals and the prevention of major industrial accidents, also constitute important yardsticks for action on health and safety.

Ratification of those standards is uneven. Some (like the Labour Inspection Convention – 128 ratifications) have high rates of ratification but others, like the Occupational Safety and Health Convention (37 ratifications), have poor rates. Particularly shocking is the low level of ratification of the Asbestos Convention (only 26 ratifications), at a time when it is proven

that the fibre kills 100,000 people each year.

The time has come to engage in real action for change. Last year, the ILO adopted new “Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems”. Parties have agreed to focus on this as an umbrella programme of action and a means for governments, and employers’ and workers’ organizations to promote new forms of cooperative management system that can address the shortfall in adherence to current ILO instruments and programmes. These Guidelines can be made to accompany those principles enshrined in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. However, it is up to us all to become familiar with them and to push for dialogue about them within each and every country.

Undeniably there is a lot that needs to be done to encourage and promote observance of the ILO instruments on health and safety. An interesting proposal made in this publication deserves attention: why not add one instrument on health and safety to the core labour standards referred to in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work?

Yet another message appears in most of the contributions. When it comes to implementation of ILO standards, prevention of accidents and occupational diseases and general improvement of health and safety at work, there is no better bet than a strong trade union presence. Respect for core labour standards, namely freedom of association and the right to organize, has a direct impact on the health and safety situation at work, as they provide for workers to form or join trade unions and for these unions to be able to negotiate conditions with employers. This in turn implies that trade unions really must ensure that health and safety remains at the top of their priorities. As information within this issue of *Labour Education* suggests, action on health and safety is one of the key tests applied by workers when deciding whether to join trade unions or to maintain their union membership. Of course, bouquets are always rarer than brickbats, but the trade union movement itself has been too discreet about its achievements in improving health and safety conditions for millions of workers – and about its prevention work, which has probably saved just as many lives. Action on health and safety will be central to renewed efforts by the labour movement to recruit and organize, a number of our contributors assert.

Finally, health and safety issues are not confined to the workplace. Production processes, the use, storage and disposal of chemicals, the type and consumption of energy etc. all have an impact on the wider environment. For many of the concerns about sustainable development, answers will be found in the workplace. That is why trade unions have put sustainable development on their own agenda, and why they could make a unique contribution to global efforts. The World Summit on Sustainable Development which will be held in Johannesburg later this year has placed public health at the top of its priorities. It therefore provides an excellent opportunity to link across to occupational health and safety. Indeed, the health and safety of workers is a barometer for how society treats the public at large. The Summit will have to recognize that the implementation of sustainable development starts at the workplace and that trade unions must be involved with the employers in promoting effective solutions for change. Not the least of their concerns must be to secure a “fair employment transition” for workers whose future will depend on how governments and companies deal with improving the environment. Like the trade unions, the ILO is calling on the Johannesburg Summit to build a social dimension into sustainable development action.

The 28th of April is the International Day of Commemoration for Dead and Injured Workers. It has been observed for a number of years by the international trade union movement, and now by the ILO, with the aim of drawing attention to a world tragedy that too often goes unnoticed.

Obviously, the best tribute that can be paid to those who died or were injured at work is to take action to ensure that this situation is addressed and remedied. Both the ILO and trade unions were founded to ensure that people work in dignity and security. Let no-one have any doubts about that.

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