

## Is workplace violence inevitable?

*We must not fall into the error of regarding violence and stress as inevitable. It is quite possible to combat them effectively, provided that the tripartite partners play the game by establishing effective social dialogue.*

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Ahmed Khalef<sup>1</sup>

Bureau for Workers' Activities  
ILO

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The issue of safety at work cannot be tackled without looking at new forms of enterprise organization and management and their potential and actual effects on workers' physical and moral integrity. In fact, all the most serious medical analyses and surveys<sup>2</sup> agree that the "classic" on-the-job health burdens are tending to decrease, particularly in the industrialized countries where trade unionism and occupational medicine have brought enormous progress, even though we should remain prudent and recognize that much remains to be done.

But while the old pathologies are to some extent waning, new health problems attributable to psychosocial burdens are on the increase. The main identifiable causes, apart from the heavier demands associated with the continuous introduction of new working methods and technologies, are the intensification of work (workforce cuts in response to fluctuating workloads, plus new means of communication), the speeding up of the work process (production to tight schedules or "just in time") and, in many places, the fear of losing one's job. In short, the liberal enterprise management of the past fifteen years has had an enormous human cost in terms of workplace health. Flexibilization and deregulation, linked to more and more ferocious competition between firms seeking market share, have helped to make work even more burdensome. Increasingly, the suffering is also psychological.

The rise in workplace violence and its corollary, stress, is no doubt one of the most visible signs of this trend. The new organization of work is putting more workers at risk of aggression, while transforming the definition of tasks and increasing workloads.

### Definition

Workplace violence is difficult to define. This is a vast field. When some people hear the word "violence", they automatically assume that it means physical aggression, such as might for example be suffered by a teacher in the classroom, a money transporter during a hold-up or a taxi driver who is attacked by a customer. That side of the issue certainly does exist, and it gives cause for concern. It is examined elsewhere in this issue of *Labour Education* (see, for example, the article by Dominique Marlet on page 21). But increasingly, we are also having to deal with more insidious forms of violence which have profound consequences for the mental health of the victims. Moral harassment, ill-treatment, hazing and threats are among the forms now taken by workplace violence. So in fact, workplace violence is "any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work".<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that

this definition includes incidents that take place on the journey between the worker's home and the workplace. The main actions or incidents concerned include:

**Threatening, violent or abusive behaviour.** Violent behaviour is detrimental to physical integrity. It includes sexual aggression, such as rape. Hitting, kicking, pushing and jostling are among its other manifestations. "Threatening" or "violent" behaviour may, for example, be constituted by fist-waving, material destruction, the throwing of objects at the victim, or slaps. Behaviour may also be "abusive" – bullying, lack of respect, and humiliation.

**Harassment.** Under the ILO definition, this covers any behaviour that demeans, humiliates, embarrasses, disturbs, insults or discomforts an individual, in whatever manner, by words, gestures, swearing or insults.

Generally, the word "harassment" is taken to mean any conduct – based on age, disability, HIV status, domestic circumstances, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, race, colour, language, religion, political, trade union or other opinion or belief, national or social origin, association with a minority, property, birth or other status – that is unreciprocated or unwanted and which affects the dignity of men and women at work.<sup>4</sup>

## Multiple facets

Harassment may be sexual (see the article by Natacha David on page 7) when it consists of incongruous and misplaced conduct of a sexual nature which offends and constitutes a threat to or humiliation of the person who undergoes it.

To complete the list, there are also written or verbal threats, overly strong language, pestering, emotional cruelty and hazing.

Harassment is a form of psychological violence. Such violence is more pernicious than the physical variety, because it simultaneously damages the physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development of the victim.

As may be seen, workplace violence can have many facets. These may range from mere rumour to vandalism, sabotage and even murder or, when the violence turns inwards, suicide.

Work-related violence may occur even when the worker is outside his or her regular workplace – for instance, when visiting a client.

### Acts of violence against a person's work\*

#### A. Evaluation of work

1. Unjust or exaggerated criticism of work
2. Negative evaluation of work, internal memos
3. Excessive work monitoring
4. Excessive medical monitoring

#### B. Assignment of tasks

1. Withdrawal of work tasks
2. Overwork
3. Absence of work
4. Proliferation of different/new tasks
5. Tasks inappropriate to the victim's skills level or state of health
6. Pointless or absurd tasks

#### C. Career management

1. Blackmail concerning employment, promotion or transfer
2. Compulsory transfer
3. Withdrawal or redistribution of work equipment (offices, fax machines, computers, telephones, etc.)
4. Discrimination regarding leave, working hours, work burdens or training requests
5. Verbal incitements to give up the job

#### D. Professional communication

1. Distortion or concealment of the information needed to perform the work, sabotage of the work
2. Discrediting the victim's work in front of others

#### E. Offences

1. Breaches of labour law (withdrawal of year-end bonuses, holiday allowances, legal holidays, fixed-term contracts, etc.)
2. Theft of employment documents.

\* "Violence au travail, harcèlement moral et sexuel", April 2003. <http://meta.fgov.be/pdf/pd/frdd43.pdf>

## Acts of violence against a person\*

### A. Verbal violence

1. Intrusions into private life (asking indiscreet questions, listening in to phone calls, reading the victim's emails, subjecting the victim to phone calls or registered letters at home, etc.)
2. Criticizing the victim's private life
3. Verbal bullying, shouting at the victim
4. Remarks impinging on a person's dignity (mockery, misplaced humour, racism, sexism, nicknames, etc.)
5. Disparaging a person in front of others
6. Refusing to cooperate with the victim
7. Manipulation of verbal communication (denying an oral agreement, lying, vague or shifting comments, emotional blackmail, manipulation of feelings)
8. Forbidding other workers to talk to the victim
9. Spiteful rumours, unfounded accusations

### B. Physical violence

1. Aggressive gestures (door-slamming, table-thumping, etc.)
2. Threats of physical aggression
3. Physical aggression (jostling, spitting, stepping on the victim's feet, molestation, etc.)
4. Damaging or destroying the victim's work equipment or personal property
5. Stalking (following the victim in the street, staking out the victim's home, etc.)
6. Extortion of money/racketeering through physical intimidation
7. Hazardous working conditions (repetitive exposure of the victim, but not of others, to dangerous products; repeated handling of objects that are too heavy, etc.)

### C. Sexual violence

1. Sexual violence without physical contact (making advances, allusions or remarks with sexual connotations, undressing the victim with one's eyes, etc.)
2. Sexual violence with physical contact (brushing up against somebody, deliberate physical contact, groping, etc.)

### D. Behavioural violence

1. Minor vexations, mean tricks (turning off the heating, hiding things, etc.)
2. Offensive gestures (turning one's back, refusing to say hello, refusing to shake hands, shrugs, sighs, heavenward glances, etc.).

\* "Violence au travail, harcèlement moral et sexuel", April 2003. <http://meta.fgov.be/pdf/pd/frdd43.pdf>

Studies and statistics show that certain situations exacerbate the risk of violence, and must therefore be taken into account when adopting prevention measures. Particularly at risk are:

- Workers in contact with the public
- Workers who handle or have custody of valuables, such as money and jewellery
- Workers who carry out inspection or surveillance tasks
- Workers in contact with psychologically unstable individuals
- Workers who perform their tasks alone or in an isolated place
- Workers who are frequently on the road (truck and taxi drivers)
- Workers whose occupational environment is related to the consumption of alcohol
- Night workers and those who work so-called unsocial hours (shift work, Sunday work).

From all this, it may be deduced that public service workers, particularly in health care and teaching, are particularly at risk. However, no sector is really immune from violence or harassment. Their occurrence, frequency and intensity depend to a large extent on the organization of work.

What is also certain is that, among workers, the number of pathological complaints attributable in one form or another to violence is constantly increasing. In the United States alone, more than a million workers a year are estimated to suffer acts of workplace violence, and there are more than two work-related homicides every day!<sup>5</sup> Canada has seen the same phenomenon of growing violence at work, according to a study of compensation claims lodged by workers. In this case, the workers most at risk were health care staff, cashiers and police officers.<sup>6</sup> The human and financial costs of the violence are considerable (see the article "Preventing workplace violence" by Lene Olsen on page 31).

It would be inappropriate to discuss workplace violence without mentioning something that can both cause it and result from it, namely work-related mental illnesses.

Here, a distinction should first be made between job placement of people who are already mentally ill and the mental ailments that can actually be caused by work.

It should be emphasized that the employment of people who are suffering from, or have suffered from, mental ailments is no longer particularly problematic, due to the progress made by psychiatry over the past fifty years. Indeed, more and more of them are able to go back to work while still in treatment, or after therapy. They are, however, doubly vulnerable in the face of psychological violence at work. On the one hand, even if the risks of decompensation leading to downtime are no higher than those arising from a chronic somatic illness, they unfortunately provoke irrational reactions among the workforce, due to the fear and anxiety to which mental illness still all too often gives rise. On the other hand, as they are more fragile than other workers, they are less able to cope with the relational conflicts which, unless carefully managed, can elicit violent reactions from them.

### Vicious circle of violence

So we are faced with a vicious circle: workers with mental disorders may be the victims of harassment engendered by a fear of those who are different, but they may also themselves become violent. Which all goes to show the importance and usefulness of health education that addresses the whole of a firm's workforce, including management. After all, managers should take account of the fact that workers being treated for mental disorders often have to take psychiatric medicines (anxiolytics, antidepressants, hypnotics, neuroleptics) whose secondary effects in relation to productivity, safety and responsibilities require judicious assessment. Judicious, because there is no general rule. Some

people tolerate these products very well, with virtually no lateral ill-effects, even when the dosage is high. It should also be remembered that working activities (and everything that derives from them: social integration, pay, emotional ties developed through work) are often vital to the mental equilibrium of these workers. Tolerance towards them is a matter of principle and moral responsibility incumbent upon everyone – including the employer who should, for example, always be aware that the loss of a job may plunge mentally fragile workers even deeper into sickness, anxiety, depression, delirium and, finally, suicide.

Employers' responsibility is all the greater because some mental illnesses are linked to work. Indeed, they may be termed "work-caused mental illnesses". They may result from workplace violence suffered by the worker, and they may also, indirectly, be the root cause of such violence.

Mental illnesses caused by work may be classified into three categories:

**Occupational mental illnesses.** These illnesses are the result of a toxic or physical encephalopathy caused by prolonged exposure to chemical or physical toxics. Most often, they take on the semiological form of an acute psychosis, such as a confusional syndrome, a delirious fit, a persecution syndrome or a hallucinatory fit. The chemical toxics that may provoke occupational mental illnesses include carbon disulphide, chlorinated solvents, lead, ether and the alcohols. Physical toxics include work under hyperpressure (hyperbaric chambers), heat stroke (insolation), cranial trauma and exposure of the brain to ionizing radiation.

**Psychiatric syndromes.** These syndromes, which are specific to the sequels of work accidents and certain occupational diseases, are generally manifested in the *sinistrosis* observed after a work accident, particularly in the construction sector and public works. Because of their precarious situation, migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to this type of syndrome.

**Mental suffering.** Here, we are no longer dealing with well-marked mental illnesses, such as those described in psychiatric medicines, but rather with psychological suffering which, although quite real, is compensated – in other words, it is kept in check by the individual with the help of individual and collective defence mechanisms. Even if this suffering does not lead to illness as such, it does have an impact on work burdens, and thus affects workers' health. It may also be the source of violence, by exposing the affected workers to discrimination or bullying, or by triggering violent reactions in the affected workers themselves. Two factors – dissatisfaction and anxiety – promote mental suffering. Dissatisfaction generally results from an excessive division of labour, from job content, from the truncation of human relations due to surveillance, and from the hierarchy and methods of command, thus leading to stereotyped, codified relationships which rule out the necessary emotional commitment.

Anxiety, on the other hand, is a response by the organism to the dangers posed by certain tasks. It is particularly frequent among workers in sectors with a reputation for high risks, such as construction, aviation, nuclear power and chemicals. Thus, anxiety is a psychological emanation of physical hazards. It is an integral part of the work burden.

Other causes of anxiety are also noted within reputedly non-hazardous tasks. These causes are to be found in command structures, work cadences, job insecurity etc. They should not be ignored, as they too may give rise to violent behaviour.

The various manifestations of violence to which workers may fall victim are described elsewhere in this issue of *Labour Education*. But it is no doubt useful to recall the link that must be made between stress and violence at work. All the more so as this question caused controversy at a recent ILO meeting<sup>7</sup> during which the employers' representatives refused to discuss the stress aspect of violence at work, as they felt that the two phenomena cannot be linked.

And yet the link does exist. In its most extreme form, stress can induce violence to the point at which the workers affected turn the violence inwards, against themselves. How else could one explain the suicide of a Korean executive who, overwhelmed by a scandal affecting his firm, jumped off the twelfth floor of its building in Seoul, on 3 August 2003?

This case and many others have been reported by the media, but a deeper analysis of suicide cases inevitably leads us to the stress factor. "It is commonly accepted that high stress, together with easy access to means, are important factors which put people in certain occupations at greater risk of dying by suicide", states a report published in the United Kingdom by a suicide prevention association.<sup>8</sup> More and more studies confirm the role of work stress in a growing number of suicides. Some people have even deduced that suicide may now top the list of the causes of work-related deaths. Things have not reached that stage yet.

### **Stress – a workplace health problem**

Stress at work is by no means a negligible occupational health problem. Fortunately, its sufferers are not always driven to suicide, but it is seriously prejudicial to workers in terms of their health, to enterprises through downtime and to society through compensation costs. The resulting absenteeism is an excellent case in point. Among the most frequent causes of absenteeism, occupational stress ranks just after back pains (which may themselves, in certain cases, be a symptom of stress).

### **Violence and decent work**

Health and safety at work are a pillar of any social policy and a key component of the decent work promotion strategy developed by the ILO. What counts is not just employment creation, but the creation of jobs that meet the criteria of decency and dignity.

So what needs to be developed is a truly holistic and integrated approach to health and safety at work. An approach whose primary aim is to improve well-being in the workplace while adjusting to overall developments within the economy, which is becoming more service-oriented. All the changes affecting the world of work in the globalization era must be measured, accompanied and anticipated. Which is why we must tackle the newly emerging hazards of stress-related disorders, but also moral harassment and violence at work.

Prevention is, of course, the lynchpin of any policy on this issue. In this respect, it should be recalled that the employer is under an obligation to identify potential risks to worker health and take all possible steps to eliminate or limit them. The employer must also adapt the work to the individual, notably in order to reduce the effects of monotonous work and paced work, which are major causes of occupational accidents and are damaging to workers' health.

### A "road map" for enterprises

Ideally, a sort of "road map" for enterprises should be drawn up, concerning work-related stress and violence. This would facilitate the establishment of prevention and monitoring.

There are many ways of going about this – for instance, through job redesign, improved social support, rewards for workers' efforts and, above all, adapta-

tion of the work environment to workers' aptitudes, needs and expectations.

We must not fall into the error of regarding violence and stress as inevitable. It is quite possible to combat them effectively, provided that the tripartite partners play the game by establishing effective social dialogue.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Doctor A. Khalef, who is the focal point for occupational health and safety within the Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV), is a specialist in occupational medicine, medical and industrial toxicology, practical ergonomics and sociology and human sciences as applied to the world of work. He is also in charge of following Arab regional affairs for ACTRAV.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the excellent article by Dr. Dominique Huez, *Les pathologies mentales générées par l'organisation du travail* in "Santé et Travail", No. 44 published by the Mutualité française (Paris, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> ILO: *Code of practice on workplace violence in services sectors and measures to combat this phenomenon*, Geneva, November 2003.

<sup>4</sup> This definition is taken from a joint ILO/ICN/WHO/PSI study published in May 2002 – see <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/releases/release37/en>

<sup>5</sup> See *The cost of violence/stress at work and the benefits of a violence/stress-free working environment*, a report prepared for the ILO by Helge Hoel, Kate Sparks and Cary L. Cooper.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Meeting of Experts to Develop a Code of Practice on Violence and Stress at Work in Services: A Threat to Productivity and Decent Work, Geneva, 8-15 October 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Samaritans information resources pack 2003. [http://www.samaritans.org/know/statistics\\_infores.shtm](http://www.samaritans.org/know/statistics_infores.shtm)