

SECTOR Note

Occupational safety and health in Utilities

The current trends of decreasing employment levels and the introduction of new technology raise concerns for safety and health practices in the workplace. With increased workloads there is a greater need to protect employees' well-being, and new technology requires proper training. The specific nature of the work in these sectors, primarily gas and electricity, requires that occupational safety and health (OSH) be an integral aspect of collective bargaining agreements as the safety and health not only of workers is involved, but of the surrounding communities as well.

Agreements on safety and health at the regional, sectoral and enterprise levels are fundamental in order to protect workers and communities. In addition, the standards established by employers should be enforced on their subcontractors. In the context of deregulation, OSH agreements can be instrumental to maintaining standards.

With multinational enterprises (MNEs) on the rise, there is an increasing need to extend their good practices and expertise to their subsidiaries, thereby enhancing the implementation and enforcement of OSH standards throughout MNE subsidiaries and their supply chain. In addition, multinational enterprises should share information with others in the regions where they operate to improve workplace health and safety. Tripartite committees could be established at different levels within the sector to address and enforce OSH issues.

Restructuring has reduced staffing levels that can be extremely dangerous not only to the workers themselves, but also to the community, which relies on a safely operating power plant providing reliable service. The importance of employers understanding the need for adequate staffing levels is crucial, as overworked employees can be less productive and sometimes dangerous. Tired people exhibit the same levels of performance impairment as those who are legally intoxicated. Tests have shown that moderate levels of fatigue produce higher levels of performance impairment than the proscribed level of intoxication. It is the employers' responsibility to provide a safe working environment, but governments and workers have a role to play as well. Governments should establish laws with which enterprises must comply. In this regard, trade unions are calling for businesses to be held accountable for their actions.

Productivity can be raised through the promotion of basic protection for all workers. Designing and implementing more effective OSH prevention and protection policies is a positive factor for higher productivity. A minimal investment is often required, but changes in work practices and organization are redeemed through increased production and fewer lost work hours from accidents. The conclusions of the 1987 Joint Meeting on Employment and Conditions of Work in Water, Gas and Electricity Supply Services pointed out that money invested in occupational safety and health should be considered as an investment to protect workers, and not as a cost to the operation.