

ICEM UPDATE

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The following is from the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM):

GEM INDUSTRY SEEKS CHILD LABOUR BAN

Child labour could be ended in the gemstone cutting and polishing industry under recommendations unanimously approved today by international union leaders from the sector.

The proposals stem from representatives of the world's gemstone industry employers and unions, and of governments, meeting in Bangkok this week. Held by the UN's International Labour Organisation (ILO), the workshop sessions ended yesterday with the adoption of detailed recommendations on child labour and other issues facing the industry.

Today, the ILO workshop's proposals were endorsed by a world conference of union leaders from the sector.

The 20-million-strong International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) is currently holding the first-ever world conference of its diamond, gem, ornament and jewellery production section. The main topics are the economic outlook for these industries; ICEM global agreements with employers and global networks of unions in companies; child labour; health, safety and environment; and an ICEM action programme for the sector.

The ICEM conference opened in Bangkok today and runs through to Sunday. A world conference of chemical industry unions will be held by the ICEM from Monday to Wednesday next week, also in Bangkok.

The recommendations from this week's union/employer/government ILO workshop cover a range of issues in the gemstone cutting and polishing industry. To tackle these questions effectively, the workshop called for the full involvement of all sections of the industry, from mining through to gemstone production, trading and retail sales.

Governments and employers' and workers' organisations should "collaborate to ensure that the gemstone cutting and polishing industry is monitored in the most effective way, starting with the REGISTRATION of all units involved in handling gemstones," the ILO meeting said.

LABOUR LAWS must be "enforced and monitored, with outside assistance where needed." Laws and regulations should be "reviewed and amended, where necessary, through social dialogue."

On HEALTH AND SAFETY, "following tripartite [union/employer/government] consultations and social dialogue, all competent authorities should identify and quantify the occupational safety and health hazards and risks at each stage of the gemstone cutting and polishing process and establish and implement the means to eliminate, or at least control, them and monitor implementation."

Employers' and workers' organisations in the sector should also "explore the feasibility of concluding SECTORAL AGREEMENTS that address employment, working conditions, occupational safety and health and training in the context of the ILO Tripartite Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work."

Use of CHILD LABOUR in gemstone cutting and polishing "cannot be justified for any reason," the union, employer and government representatives at the ILO workshop insisted. "Its tolerance and continuation in any location risk jeopardising the reputation and thus the future of the entire industry."

So they called for the "effective elimination" of child labour from the industry. Tripartite bodies in each country should set "verifiable, time-bound targets" for this. "The removal of children from all gemstone cutting and polishing activities should be verified and their exclusion monitored. Removal should not worsen the situation of the children nor have an adverse effect on family income."

Each country should set a minimum age of entry to the sector (age 16-18 was suggested), and should facilitate children's access to free, good-quality basic education followed, where possible, by appropriate vocational training. Countries should also "establish and enforce national workplace standards in line with the ILO's Core Conventions, including Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour."

If effectively monitored, codes of conduct can help to end child labour, the workshop said. "A 'solemn declaration' that diamonds and gemstones have not been produced using child labour at any stage could be an important step forward, provided that it is universal and is backed by visible and credible monitoring. Those concerned should work together to develop and implement both a declaration and a monitoring system."

The ILO should play a major role in action to tackle all the labour and social issues facing the sector, the workshop declared. In particular, it should organise a preparatory meeting of the sector's "key players" in 2003 and a full sectoral meeting in 2004-2005.

The ILO's Bangkok workshop was an informal one, and its recommendations do not yet have any official policy status. They will, however, be brought to the attention of the ILO Governing Body, and their unanimous adoption by the ICEM world conference today will add further weight to the proposals.