BACKGROUND NOTE

Safety and Health at Work in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic
An ILO Caribbean Virtual Roundtable

28 April 2020 | 2:00 - 3:30 pm Eastern Caribbean Time (ECT)

OBJECTIVE

Every year, the World Day for Safety and Health aims to create worldwide awareness of the dimensions and consequences of work-related accidents, injuries and diseases and to place the health and safety of all workers on the international agenda to stimulate and support practical action at all levels. For 2020, and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the theme of the World Day is “Stop the pandemic: Safety and health at work can save lives”.

The objective of this virtual roundtable, convened by the ILO Decent Work Team and Office for the Caribbean, is to disseminate ILO messages on the occasion of World Day for Safety and Health at Work. It also seeks to foster tripartite dialogue on policies and actions implemented in the Caribbean to address the challenges of COVID-19 to occupational safety and health (OSH).

CONTEST AND JUSTIFICATION

The health crisis generated by the global pandemic of COVID-19 has affected all economies with direct impact on the health and safety of workers. Most businesses in the Caribbean countries are operating on an “essential services mode” and isolation and social distance measures are in place to limit the spread of the virus. Although some economic sectors and companies have been able to implement remote work policies, an important number of workers continue to commute to their workplaces (e.g. workers in the health and public sectors, commerce, transport, agriculture,
food, utilities, and security forces). The public also visits workplaces and can be exposed to the virus. In all cases, new and increased occupational risks are presently urging stakeholders to undertake risk assessments and implement preventive measures.

In many countries, workers in the informal economy were forced to cease operations due to lock down measures. Others, who must continue working to ensure income, face greater vulnerabilities and lack of protection. There is a large number of workers in the tourism, agriculture and commerce sectors (formal and informal) who do not have access to preventive measures to reduce risk of contamination nor social protection. This situation is not different to household workers. Eight out of every ten domestic workers in the region are in informality, which makes them another particularly vulnerable group in this context (ILO, 2016).

Workers and their families and business owners are facing increasing mental health challenges. The key risk factor that could lead to depression and other mental illnesses are psychosocial factors (such as work-life balance, isolation, anxiety and stress from work overload combined) and job-related uncertainties (such as possible closure of businesses and the threat to employment security, return to the workplace and employer-employee issues).

Furthermore, gender inequalities are exacerbated in this context. For example, female workers in the health care sector, who represent 70 per cent of the total workforce, face a double burden because of the pandemic: longer shifts at work and unpaid care work at their homes, which has increased since the closure of schools and care institutions. Some countries have seen gender-based violence increased in cases of male workers working from home.

In this context, prevention and control measures must be a priority to protect workers from exposure to biological risks and avoid new infections. The management of the safety and health of workplaces should start with risk assessments and the adoption of prevention and protection measures. Strict protocols such as hygiene and sanitation measures, the use of adequate and sufficient personal protective equipment, the (re)design of jobs and functions, the organization of work, preventive training and monitoring of the health of workers must be implemented.

The sudden shift to remote work for a great number of workers has increased risks because the workplace at home is inadequate. Inadequate ergonomics as well as pre-existing health conditions can be exacerbated working from home.

ILO Convention No. 155 (Occupational Safety and Health), Convention No. 161 (Occupational Health Services) and Convention No. 187 (OSH Promotional Framework) are the International Labour Standards that provide a reference to review the rights and duties of governments, workers and employers in times of COVID-19. These conventions place responsibility on employers to adopt prevention and protection measures to minimize professional risks, provide appropriate protective clothing and equipment, provide adequate training and information, and consult workers. For their part, workers must cooperate with the employer to comply with preventive measures, abiding by security measures and using safety devices and protective equipment. Convention No. 155 recognizes the right of workers to withdraw from work in case of imminent and serious danger at the workplace. In 2019, the ILO announced the elaboration of a proposal to develop a new instrument in the field of biological risk.
Social dialogue and tripartism are more important than ever. Joint OSH committees are best placed to design and implement consensual measures to create healthy and safe workplaces. Labour Departments have an important role to play by providing advice through labour inspectorates and promoting compliance with regulations. Movement restrictions impose innovation in the way in which they operate, including arbitration and conciliation in cases of serious non-compliance or imminent danger to the health of workers.

Initial measures adopted by countries were oriented to provide information and advice to workers and employers about the pandemic and to promote healthy and safer workplaces. Access to paid leave has been one of the measures proposed to workers to comply with physical isolation measures recommended by public authorities. Employment injury schemes have provided support to workers affected by the disease, including medical benefits. Some occupational diseases derived from the pandemic have also been covered by these schemes. Sickness benefits provided by social security organizations have been amended to guarantee income replacement to workers affected and infected by COVID-19. Measures are also being designed to facilitate safe return to workplaces after the pandemic.

The current crisis is a unique opportunity to reassess the central role of occupational safety and health and its eventual recognition as a fundamental right and principle at work, in accordance with the recommendation of the World Commission on the Future of Work.

POLICY MEASURES AND ACTIONS FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE HEALTH OF WORKERS IN THE WORKPLACE

The following measures could be implemented at the national level:

- Strengthening risk prevention and control measures including instructions, guidelines, protocols, campaigns - general or aimed at groups of workers with high exposure to COVID-19 - involving governments and employers’ and workers’ organizations.
- Revision and adaptation of the operations of Labour Departments to effectively provide OSH services during and after the pandemic
- Promotion of OSH for workers in telework
- Revision of OSH legislation to implement reforms and make it relevant for future crisis
- Access to holidays and paid leave including sick leave, preventive quarantine leave and/or child/elderly/special care
- Extension of coverage by employment injury and sickness schemes including access to prevention, compensation and health benefits by recognizing COVID-19, and its consequences, as an occupational disease
- Promotion of OSH in the informal sector
- Prevention of discrimination, exclusion and all type of violence generated by changes in working modalities