



Stakes are high for occupational health & safety

Put World of Work, Workers & Workplaces at the Centre of CSD Negotiations

New York, Sunday, 6 May:

In this update find:

- * Occupational cancer & air pollution at the top of the trade union agenda
- * ILO, Government & company accountability a priority
- * Strengthen cross-cutting occupational & public health links

A trade union delegation from 22 countries is asking governments at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) in New York to put the world of work at the centre of their policy recommendations for industrial development, energy, climate change and atmospheric pollution. They want workplaces to be regarded as a primary venue for action on sustainable development, with joint worker-employer involvement as the vehicle for change.



Repon Chowdhury
at the UN CSD

“The stakes for occupational health & safety are high in all theme areas,” said Repon Chowdhury of the Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress. “This is why we want the final text to recognise the capacity of workers to be directly involved in prevention of occupational fatalities and diseases, as this will also yield huge payoffs in public health and environmental protection”.

On Thursday 3 May, a team of union representatives from each continent ascended to the upper floors of the UN headquarters to deliver a report to the Secretary General (SG) about the thousands of activities that took place on this year’s *28 April International Commemoration Day (ICD) for Dead and Injured Workers*. According to official statistics, work-related fatalities claim over 2.2 million workers, with a further 160 million suffering from industrial disease per year.

On the same day a second of team of unionists met with the EU Presidency to press home the need for a focus on workplaces at the CSD, and still another group continued the week-long lobby of country delegates with proposals that would allow workers and trade unions to make a difference in the implementation of CSD policies.

Occupational cancer and air pollution top the trade union agenda

Trade unionists who delivered the 28 April report to the UN SG’s office, conveyed the message that occupational cancers were at the top of their agenda. About 13% of the 7.6 million cancer deaths each year are attributable to occupational causes, most of which could be prevented through workplace action. In their negotiations over the issue, unions point to chemicals, asbestos and certain metals (like cadmium) being one of the chief culprits identified this year.

Call for asbestos ban: One trade union backgrounder employed for the CSD negotiations called for a world ban of asbestos and reported that it’s already killing over 100,000 workers

per year. It further warns that the dismantling, redesigning, restructuring or new construction of buildings or infrastructure for energy conservation, or adaptation to climate change events will likely pose new potential for releasing asbestos into the environment. Chowdhury warns that climate events like floods or violent weather patterns could also cause the sudden release of cocktails of dangerous chemicals into the environment, many unknown.

Cadmium exposure in China highlighted: The denial of worker and trade union rights as a major barrier to occupational health and public safety will be demonstrated when union negotiators bring the case of Chinese subsidiaries of *Gold Peak Batteries International Limited* into a discussion of supply chain management coordinated at the CSD later this week by DTIE, UNEP's industry division. Workers who are not allowed to participate in workplace decision-making are being exposed to cadmium, a well-known occupational and public carcinogen. Exposure abuses, deficient monitoring and suspicious risk analysis by company and local authorities are leading to sickness, worker fatalities, and unresolved disputes, strikes and court actions: http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpQ_9i.EN.pdf.

Progress on workplace management of chemicals: At the same time as unions began their work at the CSD last week, another team representing the International Trade Union Confederation held a highly successful side-event during a meeting of the *Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants* (POPs) in Senegal. Chowdhury reports that unions are also involved in consultations about chemicals with the World Health Organisation, as well as in other processes, such as the *Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management* (SAICM). In every case, a dominant issue remains, he said: Workers and trade unions can play a significant role in the management of chemicals and wastes but their participation must be promoted and supported with resources for training and education. Unions at the CSD are reminding negotiators that workers and trade unions can help implement the UN *Global Harmonization of Hazard Classification and Labeling Systems*, especially at the workplace where it really counts.

Governments & multinationals must act on enforcement & accountability

A consistent message being brought to government negotiators at the CSD by trade union delegates is that respect of ILO core labour standards, including worker and trade union rights, must be seen as a mainstay of a sustainable industrial development policy.

At CSD preparatory meetings held in New York last February, union representatives charged that governments seemed to have fallen under that spell of a prevailing belief that the best course of action was to make themselves small, unleash the forces of the market, and then get out of the way, said Chowdhury. "Last week, our delegates followed up with the message that assertive state and inter-state action is needed for new and effective international regulation. Constraints on the way markets work and on those who act as the main players are badly needed in today's world."

In another publication circulated for this CSD Session, unions are encouraging governments to ratify and enforce a set of ILO Conventions that deal with occupational health and safety. Included in this is a statement that the OECD Guidelines on Multinationals must be supported because they call for "adequate steps to ensure occupational health and safety in [company] operations." Unions are also contending that intense globalisation and supply-chain exploitation of labour, combined with upheavals due to climate and other events create an urgent need for corporate accountability on OHS issues.

Strengthen cross-cutting links between Occupational & Public Health

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) called on governments to: “strengthen & promote ILO and World Health Organization (WHO) programmes to reduce occupational deaths, injuries and illnesses, and link occupational health with public health promotion as a means of promoting public health and education” [WSSD JPOI 46m].

In a separate letter being distributed to governments attending the 2007 Session of the CSD, trade unions warn that AIDS is already undermining environment and health services. The pandemic, they say, cuts across occupational, environment and health issues, with implications for capacity-building and the achievement of the MDGs.

Trade unions further warn that the pandemic is undermining the capacity of African countries to implement climate change adaptation measures, as provided by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), raising concern about the impact of AIDS on future delivery of environmental and emergency services.

They also say that AIDS and the incidence of occupational injury and disease reinforce a vicious cycle of poverty, as nearly 36% of the world’s labour force is without health services protection. The personal cost of health care drives them and their families into poverty.

Countries need to invest in occupational health as one of their strategies to combat poverty, is one of the messages trade unions are delivering. They point to a conference on social health protection convened last March, in which French President Jacques Chirac said that improving health status and life expectancy is the primary means of achieving the first MDG for eradicating poverty and hunger. Governments should therefore invest in health & health services as a driver for wealth generation and growth.

Lucien Royer

International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)

Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC)

In New York: Cell (336) 7769 9429 or Hotel 1(212) 355 0300

15, Rue Laperouse - 75016 paris, France

Tel (331) 5537 3737 Fax 4754 9828

royer@tuac.org