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Arbeit und Gesundheit

***International Federation of Building and Wood Workers
(IFBWW)***

**A Trade Union's Policy on Healthy Work and
Development**

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Every year, over 100 million work-related accidents kill more than 200,000 workers and injure many more; an estimated 65-160 million workers contract diseases related to their work. This is the result of dangerous and unhealthy working conditions in which workers are the first victims of unsustainable work practices, neglected in the drive for development. It is important for unions to develop a comprehensive policy calling for a more responsible attitude towards working conditions, the environment and development and the links between these.

The building sector is one of the most dangerous of industries, accounting for two to six times the national average for injury rates in most countries. Falls from heights and electrocution are the most common accidents. The high injury rate can be put down to employment of casual labour, the transient nature of worksites and extremes of weather. Workers in the wood processing, wood working and construction materials industries are also exposed to many chemical hazards in the form of solvents, resins, wood preservatives, paints and lacquers, as well as dusts. All too often, the health of building and wood workers and their families is further threatened by intolerable living conditions and local environmental degradation and exploitation.

Within this context, any global policy on healthy work and development has to address the whole quality of human existence, mainly through the rights of workers to a safe job with good working conditions, one that enables them and their families to live with dignity and self-reliance. Thus the policy of the International Federation of Building and Wood Workers (IFBWW) is directed towards the prevention of occupational risks and aims at the participation of workers in the control of their environment.

Getting workers and trade unions involved

Well managed joint union/management health and safety programmes at the workplace can make an important contribution to the protection of the environment, living conditions and sustainable development. Indeed, such measures are best promoted at the workplace which is often the cause of much environmental degradation and exploitation of resources, and where workers can use their knowledge of the production process and company policies to help resolve the environmental and social impact of work activities.

Even within the trade unions' own membership, it may be difficult to get acceptance of health and safety as a trade union priority. But the truth remains that joining a union can save your life, as shown by several studies around the world that indicate that involvement of trade union health and safety programmes and structures greatly reduce workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths.

Develop a trade union policy on occupational and environmental health

Trade unions are thus in the front line when it comes to the impact of unhealthy work on their own and on local conditions. They also have the (potential) organisation, experience and commitment to identify problems and seek practical solutions to them. There are a number of measures that unions can take:

Awareness raising of members and community. Many may be apathetic or accepting of risks for a variety of reasons. Many are not aware that improvements can be made - often cheaply and simply. Another aspect is the idea that insisting on improvements may conflict with other aims, especially job security.

Education and training. In order to deal with occupational and environmental health issues (and the issues can become quite technical) workers need education, training and information, firstly to understand the issues and, secondly, to put this knowledge into effect, to be able to participate in decision-making at all levels.

Technical support. Those members who have been trained to protect workers' interests in workplace health and safety and environmental issues will obviously need technical backup to make sure their training is used to best advantage.

Collective bargaining. Unions have always been involved in negotiating agreements on all kinds of issues - wages, hours of work, and so on. These traditional areas of bargaining can be expanded into a new bargaining agenda to cover agreements that affect the rights and lives of members confronted by the need for change for more sustainable working practices.

Campaigning. Organising campaigns on specific issues is a method familiar to the trade union movement in many countries. The aim of campaigning is to challenge attitudes, to alter a trend and/or to defend something that is being threatened.

Environmentally sustainable work and lifestyles. There are practical steps that everyone can take in their private lives and in the workplace. Likewise, companies (and unions) can also be encouraged to alter their purchasing and recycling policies, for instance.

It is important for unions to develop a comprehensive policy calling for a more responsible attitude towards working conditions, the environment and development and the links between these. This calls for controlling risks at the source, breaking away from former policies of danger money for workers required to work in dangerous conditions, and expanding the negotiating role of the unions, both in health and safety and environmental agreements.

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