

WSSD 2002: Trade Unions @ Johannesburg

THIS REPORT sets out one of the principal concerns of the trade union movement at the Johannesburg Summit. Trade unions around the world have policies, experience and activities on all of the main issues on the Johannesburg agenda, integrating the environmental, the social and the economic. For further details on these, please see the comprehensive trade union document for the Summit, entitled "A New Deal", prepared by the ICFTU and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC).

"Making sustainability work"

Why workplaces are central to sustainable development

Every day more than 5,000 workers lose their lives through accidents and disease in factories, fields, mines and other workplaces—mostly in developing countries. During the 10 days of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg between 26 August and 4 September, over 50,000 workers will die from work accidents and disease across the globe, more than will be killed by war or even AIDS. Work-related illness and injuries are a major drain on world resources, but they are largely avoidable. With strong unions in place, workplaces are cleaner and safer, and this has a significant positive effect in the community at large.

THE STARK REALITY

According to the ILO⁽¹⁾, the number of accidents, injuries and fatalities in the workplace is actually increasing. Currently 250 million accidents occur in the workplace every year and work-related diseases affect some 160 million



Photo: Banana Link

people. This combination of disease and accidents claims the lives of over 2 million workers per year, leaving millions of family members without an income. This is equivalent to 3 deaths every minute - nearly double the deaths due to war, and more than those due to HIV/AIDS. At least 12,000 child labourers die because of their work each year.

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development
Rio declaration of 1992

Agricultural workers are particularly exposed to danger, with fatal

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workplace accidents accounting for some 170,000 casualties worldwide in this sector. Mining is especially unsafe in many places, and the construction industry accounts for over 55,000 known fatalities each year, while many more go unreported.

Although accidents and disease occur in workplaces the world over, it will come as no surprise that workers in the developing world bear the brunt of the suffering. For example, the rate of fatal accidents in developing countries in Asia is

four times higher than that of industrialized countries - certain hazardous jobs can be from 10 to 100 times riskier in that part of the world. And most of the world's workers have no insurance or compensation for death and disability. Only around 10% of working people in developing countries are covered, and even in some industrialised countries, only around half the workforce are properly insured. Many employers and governments find it cheaper in the short term to profit from unsustainable workplaces and avoid insurance premi-

Export Processing Zones: a haven for hazardous jobs

Export Processing Zones (EPZ) or (as they are commonly termed in Mexico) 'Maquiladoras' show perhaps the starkest link between ununionised workplaces and unsustainable practises such as appalling environmental standards, high levels of pollution and dreadful working conditions. Fiercely anti-union, and with a lack of regulation as often the principal attraction marketed to multinationals by governments hungry for foreign direct investment, EPZs are not just a danger to workers inside the plants but also for surrounding communities.

In just one example, near Hanoi, Vietnam, around 300 industrial plants in an EPZ pump out an estimated 200 tonnes of fumes every day and release 200,000 cubic metres of waste water, day and night, into the Sai Gon-Dong Nai river system- a total expected to double in the next ten years. Almost all these units use out-dated technology with no capacity for waste treatment. Experts say waste from these units also causes pollution to water resources, including subterranean water. In addition, nearly 380 tonnes of solid waste are turned out every day by these industrial and processing zones. This includes 76 tonnes of wastes that do not easily disintegrate, such as metal, plastics, and chemical packaging. During the 1990s, water quality in the Sai Gon, Dong Nai, and Thi Vai rivers seriously deteriorated, causing a marked drop in biodiversity and with serious detrimental effects on the lives of about 10 million people in the region.

For several years, the sector has grown at a rate of 10 to 20 per cent per year. According to the ILO, there are some 850 export processing zones in the world (35 in North America, 225 in Asia, 133 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 81 in Europe and 47 in Africa). A total of 27 million people are employed in them, mostly young women. A campaign launched recently in the media by the Central American Textile Industries Association emphasised that Salvadoran women are "submissive, hard-working, adroit and non-unionised".

What unions hope to achieve from the summit:

To convince governments and the international community that decent jobs and clean and safe workplaces are the key to the future of sustainable development

ICFTU - Fashioning a New Deal (2002)

ums, but the ongoing economic and developmental impacts of this are huge. In addition, existing social protection arrangements are under threat due to pressure from international financial institutions on developing and transition country governments.

Much of the suffering generated by poor health and safety has little to do with the level of development or economic conditions, and it can be avoided. There are many examples of enterprises in developing countries which have made major improvements in health and safety due to trade union and public pressure. But the continuing pressure for deregulation and competition at any cost undermines the position of the more responsible employers. Along with effective regulation, multinational companies must be prepared to pay fair prices and insist on social and environmental standards, rather than simply dumping the problem on developing country suppliers.

THE GLOBALISATION EFFECT: HAZARDOUS AND DEADLY WORK CONTINUE TO BE EXPORTED

Even since the Rio Summit in 1992, the figures have worsened, one of the major downsides of free-market globalisation.

The rules and regulations which govern globalisation are designed mainly to increase the volume of global trade and reduce barriers to international investment. Developing and transition countries are being pressed to open up markets, privatise necessary public services and follow a free-market orthodoxy which is a proven failure. Employ-

ers who observe acceptable social and environmental standards are under continuous pressure to meet competition from those who exploit workers and use unsustainable environmental practices. The interests of big business are well catered for, but working people and their communities are being left behind.

Millions upon millions of workers are denied the right to form and join legitimate trade unions, depriving them of the chance to bargain for better incomes and clean and safe workplaces. The rules of the global economic and financial institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO, as well as the relevant regional bodies, must be reformed to make sure that the international labour standards agreed by governments at the ILO as well as global environmental standards, are implemented in full. Increasingly, lack of corporate accountability and transparency is placing the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people in jeopardy and damaging the prospects for sustainable economic development.

Globalisation is not bringing the promised benefits to ordinary people. Frequently it means that rather than clean up their act, companies move to countries where governments repress workers' rights and permit environmental degradation in order to attract investment. And as standards in those countries improve, many companies simply move on to other places in their quest to cut costs and maximise returns to investors. Sustainable development worldwide will remain a distant dream unless the powerful processes of globalisation are harnessed in the interests of all.

One clear example of the "export" of hazardous practices concerns asbestos. While many industrial countries took action in recent decades to stop using asbestos and remove asbestos hazards from workplaces and public facilities, many of the asbestos companies continued to use it and even increased its use in developing countries, including in Brazil and South Africa. Untold numbers of workers

will pay for this with their lives in the coming years. It is self-evident that these profit over people environments are the antithesis of sustainable development.

In the past few years, the international community has made an unequivocal commitment to do away with the worst forms of child labour, through immediate and comprehensive action. In just the same way, immediate action is needed in every corner of the globe to stop the enormous social, environmental and economic costs of exploitation in the workplace.

THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF WORKERS AND WORKPLACES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

While these figures are startling in themselves, their ramifications on sustainable development cannot be understated. Patterns of production that yield such human misery can never be considered sustainable. Given that the vast majority of the world's pollution emanates from workplaces, and that workers and their families account for most of the world's consumers, creating a more sustainable workplace will not only save lives, but also bring economic and social development to hundreds of millions of people.

"Workplace actions exploit the natural synergy between consumption and production, with tremendous potential for spill-over between workplace and community," explains Lucien Royer (Head of the ICFTU/TUAC Health, Safety and Environment department). "And communities around the planet are being denied these positive effects because of false distinctions between what happens inside and outside the world's workplaces."

Unsustainable workplaces kill 2 million every year - ILO

Generally, the health and safety of workers is a barometer for public health, and yet the effect of workplace hazards such as pollution on surrounding communities and the public at large is often ignored. Sustainable health and environmental issues are inextricably linked to employment and workers' rights is-

Sustainable jobs: Unions working with bosses and governments

German union IG BAU is collaborating with government and employers' federations in a programme to renovate buildings, contributing to climate protection measures, whilst creating sustainable jobs. The Alliance for Work and Environment aims to renovate 300,000 apartments, create 200,000 jobs, reduce CO2 emissions and lower heating bills for tenants, land-lords, and the state by about US\$4 billion, through reduction of unemployment costs and increased income taxes etc. The immediate objective is to improve insulation of buildings, advanced heating technologies, and use of renewable energy - like photovoltaic or solar thermal systems. Thousands of new jobs are anticipated in the construction, heating, sanitary and air-conditioning sectors, as well as in building service. Financing for the programme, of up to US\$ 1 billion, is provided by the German government over a five year period. As well, a total of US\$5 billion will be available through credits at favourable rates of interest.

sues.

With the main objectives in Johannesburg being to halt environmental degradation and relieve poverty, the ICFTU is calling on the delegates to focus their attention on the pivotal role in sustainable development of workers and the workplace. Trade unions, as the le-

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gitimate representatives of workers, are central to success in the future.

The UNDP Human Development Index, and the World Economic Forum Environmental Sustainability Index, rank countries on their human development and environmental performance respectively. It is no coincidence that countries which are at the very top of both lists, such as Sweden, Finland and Norway, are amongst those with the highest levels of trade union membership in the world. Their economic models, which combine social and environmental standards, are clearly a recipe for sustainability and success.

ACCIDENTS AND AILMENTS COST THE EARTH

The need to protect human beings is essential to equitable global economic development. Since the Rio summit in 1992, trade unions have stepped up efforts to draw attention to the hundreds of thousands of workers who die, are injured or become ill due to unsafe, unhealthy workplaces.

Concentrating on improving health and safety in the workplace goes beyond the immediate and priceless impact of saving lives. Preventing these or any work-related diseases and accidents would actually play a major role in alleviating poverty. Work accidents and ailments cost 4% of the combined total of the gross national product (GNP) of all countries on the planet, or the equivalent of the total GNP of Africa, the Middle East (including oil-rich countries) and South Asia put together. "No country or company in the world has shown that it can have high levels of productivity and quality alongside low levels of safety and health at work," Lucien Royer.

Each year on April 28, the ICFTU calls international attention to the tragic toll of hazardous work, through the International Day of Mourning for Dead and Injured Workers. More and more countries are now officially recognising this day, an important first step to the global effort required to save lives and livelihoods.

THE TRADE UNION EFFECT

There is no doubt that trade unions have a positive impact on the safety and environmental standards at the workplace, and therefore its sustainability in terms of everything from cutting pollution to saving lives, according to US academic Adam Seth Litwin, now a board member of the US Federal Reserve, then with the London School of Economics. Lewin's 2001 review of health and safety in UK workplaces showed that unions dramatically improve safety in even the most hazardous workplaces. According to Litwin, a non-union office worker was 13 times more likely to suffer an injury than was a closed-shop union worker on an industrial assembly line. Even the World Bank, not always recognised for its support of trade unions, concedes that "studies in industrial countries indicate that the role of labour unions in ensuring compliance with health and safety standards is often an important one."

Since Rio in 1992, trade unions have taken forward the partnership set down in Agenda 21 when they were first designated as a 'Major Group.' In addition to participating

in major UN sessions and conferences, trade unions have intensified actions and initiatives across a wide spectrum.

This has included winning the right to participate in decisions affecting the environmental and workplace risks affecting their members. Danish unions instigated a 1999 law requiring "the involvement of employees in preventive environmental work in polluting enterprises." The global union federations have included international environmental and health and safety clauses in global framework agreements with multinationals including IKEA, Statoil and Freudenberg. International union safety projects including food and farm-work federation IUF's pesticides project and the building unions' federation IFBWW's global network are now well established.

In 1998, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) recognised "that changes to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must begin at the workplace, and must involve workers and their trade unions." Unions have never been better placed to argue for a switch from dirty to clean production.

Sustainable computing- Swedish style

Responding to the epidemic of eyestrain and crippling musculoskeletal disorders caused by workplace computer use, Sweden's white collar union federation Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation (TCO) decided to create its own international standard on quality and environmental labeling of computer displays and equipment. Screens carrying the TCO label must meet stringent energy efficiency, emission, ergonomic and recycling standards, and not use certain greenhouse gases in their production. The initiative is founded on the realisation that the pressure from governmental bodies and international organs, exerted via legislation and threats of regulation, would not be enough to provide the necessary motivation to achieve sustainable development.

Now all the world's top computer manufacturers use the TCO environmental quality label- in the US alone last year, 40 million computers bearing the union label were purchased.

"Today," explains TCO's Anna Pramborg, "we have agreements with over 100 manufacturers all over the world. TCO's label is found on 40 per cent of all computer displays sold over the world."

And there is much room for improvement. Asbestos-using factories throughout Europe switched to production of safer alternatives when they realised the unpopularity and the dangers of the deadly material. The chemical industry produces alternative solvents. White goods and cars are increasingly produced from recyclable and less hazardous materials. And many military factories have undergone the “swords to ploughshares” transition to civilian production. In Canada, unions are arguing for a “just transition” for workers in the embattled tobacco industry and unions worldwide are party to national and global agreements on sustainable forestry and green energy policies.

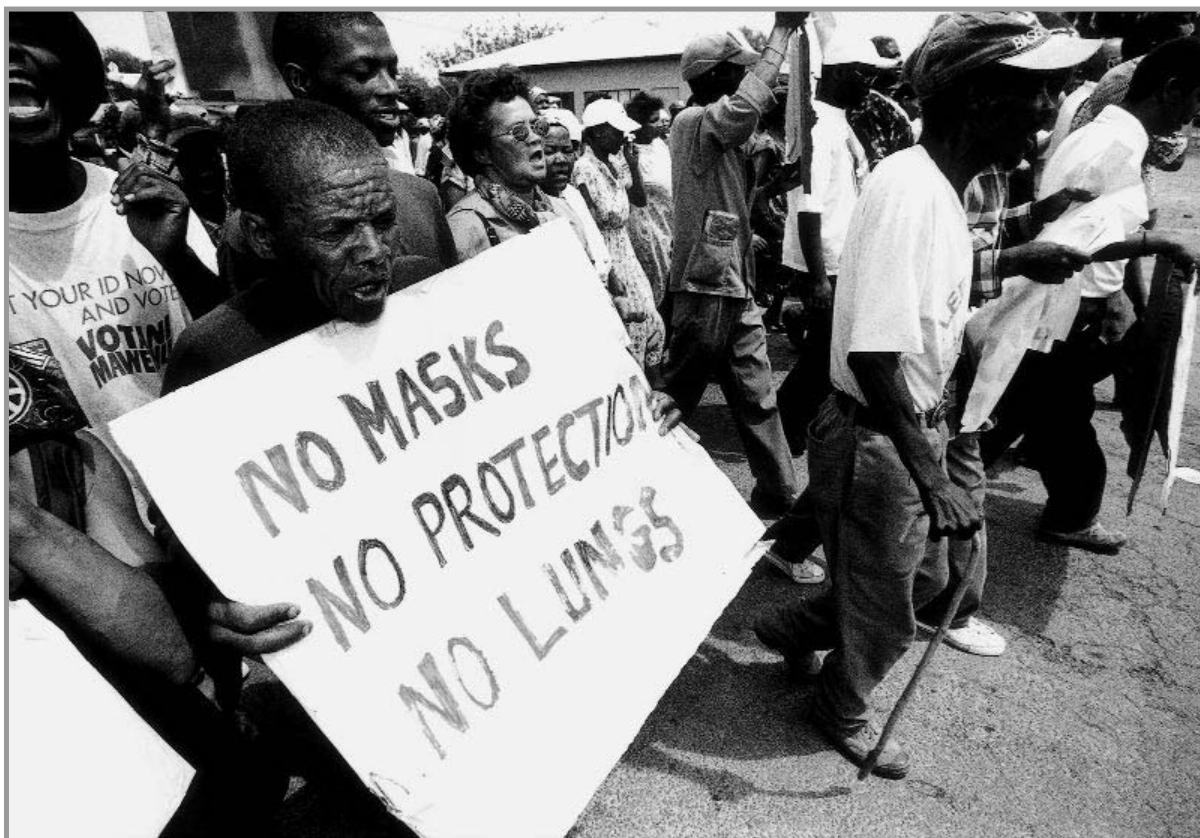
With so much at stake in the workplace, cross-cutting sustainable development issues ranging from workers’ health to environmental protection can only be effectively tackled with the participation of trade unions.

Unions in action: tackling AIDS in the workplace

AIDS is highly relevant both inside and out of the workplace. But trade unions have shown that they can play a vital role in combating the scourge. In just one example, the ICFTU’s Philippine affiliate, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP), has created seven clinics where its members and their families can visit a doctor free of charge. The personnel in these clinics play another essential role: contributing to preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. In addition, the trade union does everything it can to convince Filipinos not to stigmatise people who are HIV-positive or suffering from AIDS. “Many are still exposed to discrimination at work and do not dare to disclose the fact that they have the illness,” explains Ariel Castro, Director of Education at the TUCP. “At our seminars, we regularly ask an HIV-positive or AIDS patient to join our team of instructors, but do not inform the participants. It is only at the end of the seminar, when everyone is aware of the risk and non-risk situations, that they are surprised to have spent several hours with a carrier of the virus.”



Spotlight on asbestos...



Undoubtedly one of the biggest global killers is asbestos: the continuing story of which illustrates the close relationship between the workplace, the environment and the community at large. The campaign to ban this deadly fibre is one example of the positive and effective role that trade unions are playing for sustainable development.

Between 1965 and 1999, 259,000 deaths were attributable to exposure to asbestos fibres, and at least a further 1 million people will die over the next 30 years. Praised for its strength and fire-resistance, asbestos was, until the middle of the last century, widely used in many industries. It has been recognized for many years that inhalation can produce respi-

ratory diseases and cancers such as mesothelioma. Europe-wide, it is predicted that as many as 250,000 cases of mesothelioma will break out before 2030, whereas 200,000 deaths are expected over the same period in the United States. In France alone 2,000 people fall victim to cancers caused by asbestos every year. The British Trade Union Congress (TUC) pointed out in a report published in February 2000 that in England, asbestos causes 4,000 deaths a year, claiming more lives than road accidents. Asbestos is not just an issue for the miners who extracted it or the workers who processed it. It can be found in many places, with uses including the treatment of walls, floor tiles and roofs in paints and vehicle brakes and clutches. Some insulating material can contain up to 98% asbestos and protective clothing may also be contaminated with the same material. It, even exists in

some pipes that carry water to the tap. Asbestos is a killer, and with public health being placed among the top priorities at the WSSD, it is a question that cannot be ignored in Johannesburg. Asbestos also has other important characteristics: it is cheap and highly profitable. It is this, no doubt, that explains the campaign being conducted by the industry against a ban on its use, as called for by the UN body, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Convention 162 (dating from 1986) and fully supported by the ICFTU. "Whilst it is known to be deadly, asbestos is still very widely used, in the construction industry and elsewhere", explains Marion Hellmann, Assistant General Secretary of the International Federation of Building and Woodworkers (IFBWW), "and the reason for this is quite simply that it brought in big bucks for the mining companies that extract it and

the multinationals which process it”.

According to the most reliable estimates, in 2000, nearly 2 million tonnes of asbestos were produced worldwide. And it is the estimated \$1 billion generated each year in profit that is proving to be the major obstacle to a full ban being implemented.

Canada, the world's second largest producer of asbestos, has also been one of the world's staunchest defenders of the deadly mineral. Most notably, the Canadian government hauled its French counterpart up in front of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for imposing a nationwide ban on asbestos in 1997. In addition, the Canadian government funds the pro-asbestos Asbestos Institute as a front for industry interests. Zimbabwe, the world's fifth largest producer of asbestos (150,000 tonnes a

year), is another fierce opponent of the ban. “More than 7,000 jobs depend on the production of asbestos and 70,000 people live off it”, is the gist of what Zimbabwe's producers have to say. This argument is rejected by Rory O'Neill, the editor-in-chief of the respected Health and Safety publication 'Hazards'. He explains that “it is a myth to present campaigns advocating a ban on asbestos as threatening jobs. In reality, when the market for asbestos was at its peak, the industry had no hesitation in going ahead with mass redundancies to boost its productivity and profits. At that time, the fate of the workers was not really that important”.

“When it comes to implementation of ILO standards, prevention of accidents and occupational diseases, and general improvement

of health and safety at work, there is no better bet than a strong trade union presence.”

Jukka Takala, ILO Director of SafeWork

“Replacing asbestos with safe substitutes (of which there is no shortage, PVA, PVC and cellulose to name just three) would be a much better option, both in terms of human health and economically”, he continues. So the producers no doubt have other reasons, which they are keeping close to their chests. Fatality rates, especially in developing countries where asbestos is being increasingly and more aggressively marketed, are expected to continue to rise.

When in 2000 the WTO rejected Canada's appeal against the French

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The devastating effects of asbestos in South Africa

In December 2001, a group of 7,500 South African miners won a £21 million settlement from a British-owned multinational company, Cape, in compensation for asbestos-related diseases they contracted while labouring in asbestos mines in the northern Cape and other northern provinces of South Africa in the 1970s.

British Cape employed these workers for years without saying anything about the harmful effects of this fibrous mineral, and most of those still alive now suffer from asbestosis or other asbestos related ailments. Stéphanie Janssen - a 44-year-old mother of three teenage children, has just discovered that she is suffering from mesothelioma (a form of lung cancer which has been shown to be directly linked to asbestos).

“We can't do anything,” Stéphanie said recently: my father, a former miner, has already died of cancer, as has my mother and my elder sister. When the refinery was in operation, a cloud of blue smoke engulfed the entire city. Everyone breathed it in.” The town in question is called Prieska, and it is located in the heart of South Africa, on the banks of the Orange River. Between 1890 and 1979, asbestos made the fortune of its 15,000 inhabitants, and especially of the British company, Cape, which operated 12 asbestos mines in the region. At the time, South Africa, still under the yoke of apartheid, was the world's fourth largest producer of asbestos. But whereas Great Britain had planned (admittedly insufficient) measures as early as 1931 to protect British workers from the dangers of its fibres, it was only in 1987 that South Africa adopted its first law on the hazards of this “gift from God”.

European multinationals had pulled out long before, but not without leaving terrible marks behind them. For instance, the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) reports that between 200 and 250 unmarked graves have been discovered not far from a slag heap in Prieska. According to South Africa's national miners' union, an ICEM affiliate, there is no doubt whatsoever that these are the graves of miners who fell victim to asbestos and died whilst the apartheid regime was in power.

At least the compensation from Cape was a recognition, albeit belated, of the suffering that asbestos has caused.

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asbestos ban, trade unions were quick to follow-up on the ruling. The WTO decision paved the way for more countries to support a world-wide ban on this product in a campaign that involves the ICF-TU/TUAC as part of the Global Unions group. Trade unions are currently working with greater determination to bring together the ILO and the World Health Organisation in support of both ILO instruments regarding asbestos, and a credible programme for more research on substitutes for asbestos. At the same time, trade unions representing workers who produce asbestos, workers exposed to asbestos products, and their communities, expect governments and employers to provide asbestos workers with a

“Just Transition” to new, safer and decent employment opportunities.

Useful links:

ICFTU <http://www.icftu.org/>

Full list of agreements :

Global Unions <http://www.global-unions.org/>

Hazards <http://www.hazards.org>

(1) ILO Introductory Report: Decent Work – Safe Work XVth World Congress on Safety and Health at Work (Vienna, 27 May 2002)

Weakened unions result in workplaces which are perilous and damaging to the environment

Such is the case in the medieval conditions of the mining industry that currently exist in China. In July this year, a mine manager in Shanxi was caught trying to dump the bodies of 37 migrant workers in a river after an accident in the mine. The Chinese authorities claim to have closed thousands of illegal mines in recent years, cutting them from 82,000 in 1997 to 23,000 today. But during this period the number of reported annual deaths has remained at 5,000-6,000, and this is almost certainly the mere tip of the iceberg. Already this year, nearly 3,000 miners have died in accidents, and not just in the mines targeted by the government for their lax standards, but also in state-run concerns directly under government auspices. Genuine trade unions are of course non-existent.



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