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Swine Flu: Urgent Action Needed to Reduce Workplace Transmission Risks and Ensure Public Health

Brussels, 22 May 2009 (ITUC OnLine): As the H1N1 "swine flu" virus continues to spread around the world, the International Trade Union Confederation is calling for government action on a series of key workplace issues that are essential for reducing the risk of a severe pandemic and for preparing in case a severe pandemic does occur.

"Trade unions are uniquely placed to help in the fight against this and other diseases through their close connections with their members at work. They have particular expertise from decades of work on occupational health and safety, including programmes on infectious disease, such as HIV-AIDS. Governments and employers need to work with trade unions to help make sure that the risk of transmission of this virus in workplaces is contained," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder. "Beyond this, the chronic under-funding of public health systems, which is likely to become worse in the current global recession, must be addressed urgently and comprehensively," he added.

While the severity and death rate of the virus has so far remained comparatively low, infections have already been confirmed in some 40 countries, and the potential for this strain or a mutant derived from it to cause much more serious illness in future is of real concern. There are also well-founded concerns about the potential for this virus to develop resistance to the available anti-viral medication.

Two of the most effective means to contain the spread of pathogens such as H1N1 are through limiting person-to-person contact by temporary closure of schools and workplaces, and by encouraging people who feel sick to take time off work to avoid transmission in the workplace. However, millions of workers around the world have no entitlement to sick leave for themselves or to look after family members, in particular the lowest-paid whose families simply cannot afford to lose even a day's income.

The reality for many workers is that they risk dismissal or other sanctions for simply taking a day off work due to illness. Without urgent action by governments to deal with this issue, measures to reduce transmission in the workplace are likely to be weak or ineffectual in the countries concerned. Governments and employers need to negotiate with trade unions over sick-leave if it is not already in place, and also over provisions for limiting transmission of the virus at work, including through possible temporary shut-down of workplaces.

There are also well-founded concerns over the possibility of producing and distributing an effective vaccine in time to protect many people

from subsequent waves of infection that may occur later this year. Even if effective treatments are available, trade unions are concerned that much of the world's population, particularly in the poorer countries, will not have access to them.

The Global Union Federation Public Services International <<http://healthblog.world-psi.org/>>, which includes health workers in its membership, points out that years of pressure on public health budgets, often at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have left health systems, especially in developing countries, unable to mount effective disease prevention, or to treat all those affected by a pandemic, as is already the case with HIV-AIDS. With government budgets coming under unprecedented strain due to the global economic crisis, the ITUC calls on governments and the international financial institutions to ensure that adequate resources are available for public health everywhere, in the common interest. In the same way, urgent steps need to be taken to ensure that flu treatments and any eventual vaccine are widely available, with particular attention to the poorest countries.

The Global Union Federation for the agriculture sector, the IUF, has also focused attention on the possible contribution to this crisis of highly intensive livestock farming where large numbers of animals are concentrated in a limited space, providing an ideal environment for the evolution of viruses into more dangerous variants. Such farms, which often cut corners on animal health and other standards to produce more cheaply, were the probable source of the H5N1 bird flu virus that still poses a threat, and also appear to be the source of the H1N1 swine flu virus.

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