

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION
ITUC OnLine

One Worker Dies Every 15 Seconds Due to Employer Negligence

Brussels, 28 April 2016 (ITUC OnLine): As ceremonies around the world take place on the International Commemoration Day for Dead and Injured Workers, the ITUC has warned negligent employers of the consequences of putting workers' lives at risk. Worldwide, one worker dies every 15 seconds due to occupational injury or illness.

Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said: "Over two million workers die needlessly every year because their workplaces are dusty, dirty and dangerous. The risks are as obvious as they are preventable, whether they are falls from height, crippling workloads or chemical exposure. Every single death represents an employer's failure to act."

Occupational cancers alone kill at a rate of one worker every minute worldwide, Burrow says. "Yet pressure from corporate interests means that even asbestos, one of the worst industrial killers, is banned in only a minority of countries. This is not legitimate business activity - it is criminal behaviour."

Trade unions in more than 70 countries are marking the International Commemoration Day with a demand for 'Strong laws, Strong enforcement and Strong unions' as the only way to stop the carnage at work.

According to Burrow, "Many studies show that the presence of a union in any workplace has a strong positive effect on the health of the workforce and the economy. Combined with effective enforcement, active workplace participation delivers safer, healthier workplaces. Responsible businesses know this and benefit as a result - in retention of valued and trained staff, reduced costs and higher productivity. But there are still governments which are intent on removing 'regulatory burdens' by weakening labour laws and safety requirements. They are putting lives at risk, and also jeopardising safety-related productivity gains. The best regulated economies are usually the safest and most successful."

Public scrutiny of corporations, and their top executives, is now at an all-time high and will continue to increase, meaning that companies that seek to hide dirty and dangerous work down their supply chains can expect to suffer reputational damage. Repression of press freedom and curtailment of social media, evident in an increasing number of countries, is not stopping the world at large hearing of the tragic consequences of company negligence and disregard for workers' lives.

"From the Rana Plaza garment factory disaster to the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion, the global firms responsible have been subjected to a previously unheard-of level of sustained criticism and public scrutiny," Burrow said. "The jail term handed this month to former Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship for the death of 29 miners in a US coal mine blast is a reminder that for irresponsible bosses, the boardroom may no longer be a safe haven. Unions would rather see safe and healthy workplaces than an irresponsible employer behind bars. But if workers don't get prevention, they will seek justice. The right to come home safely from work, and live a full life without suffering occupation illness, is a permanent campaign for unions everywhere."

For more information:

There are over 2.3 million work-related deaths worldwide every year, over 6,000 every day or one every 15 seconds.

<http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/lang--en/index.htm>

An estimated 660,000 workers die each year from occupational cancers, or over one every minute. <http://www.cancerhazards.org>

Academic studies have established a substantial union safety effect.

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

A 2013 study confirmed union presence has a strong positive effect on the health of the workforce and the economy. Maureen F Dollard and Daniel Y Naser: "Worker health is good for the economy: Union density and psychosocial safety climate as determinants of country differences in worker health and productivity in 31 European countries". Social Science & Medicine, volume 92, pages 114-123, September 2013.

On 6 April 2016, a US Federal District Court sentenced Donald L Blankenship, a former chief executive of the Massey Energy Company once known as the "King of Coal," to one year in jail, with imprisonment to begin regardless of a pending appeal, and payment of a \$250,000 fine.

The ITUC represents 180 million workers in 162 countries and territories and has 333 national affiliates.

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