

A Safety Culture That Can Save Lives

By Dr. Jukka Takala

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Imagine the headlines: “Two million people dead, 270 million injured and 160 million becoming ill.” These are numbers that dwarf the natural and man-made disasters that follow one another across our newspapers and television screens. Yet rarely do we hear much about them or the fact that, tragically, most of this death and suffering – to say nothing of the immense financial cost – is preventable.

This is the annual toll of death, injury and illness that occurs at workplaces throughout the world. Fatalities from job-related accidents and illnesses amount to an average of more than 5,000 a day, with many thousands more workers suffering injuries or falling sick.

Further, the ILO estimates that some four percent of global Gross Domestic Product, more than \$1.25 trillion, is lost each year to occupational accidents and diseases.

For more than a decade, April 28 has been a day for the international trade union movement to commemorate workers who have been killed, injured or sickened on the job. In support of this observance, the International Labour Office has selected April 28 as World Day for Safety and Health at Work – a day to direct the attention of the world’s governments and workers’ and employers’ organizations to a common agenda focused on preventative measures that will reduce the suffering.

The fact is that on-the-job accidents don’t just “happen.” They are caused. For example, cancer – which accounts for a third of all work-related deaths – is caused by asbestos, other carcinogenic dusts and chemicals, and ionizing radiation. Circulatory diseases – accounting for nearly a quarter of such deaths – has causes that include stress, some types of chemicals and second-hand tobacco smoke at the workplace. Other major causes of work-related fatalities – such as accidents and communicable diseases – also have distinct cause factors.

The common thread is that causes can be addressed and the suffering can be prevented. Fortunately, in a growing number of workplaces, workers, employers, and governments are demonstrating through cooperation and dialogue that it is possible to create safer, healthier workplaces – and, at the same time, to improve productivity and bottom-line results. This is the emerging phenomenon of promoting a “safety culture” at work, a theme that is the central focus of this year’s World Day.

The safety culture requires three essential commitments: a commitment from enterprises to implement occupational health and safety management systems, a commitment for participation and involvement in such systems by the workers themselves, and, in this era of economic globalization, a commitment to create a worldwide framework so that local action on safety and health is not undermined by false concerns regarding competitiveness.

These commitments are based on the ILO’s real experience in working with its tripartite partners – governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations – to address the critical issues concerning safety and health at the workplace. It is clear that enterprises that have an occupational safety and health system, created along ILO guidelines, perform better with regard to both safety and productivity. Modern managers know that workers’ voices are rich

sources for improving safety, productivity and competitiveness – and a look at the record shows that strong and effective union representation leads to safer workplaces. The high safety standards in Sweden, for example, are the direct result of long-term policies and practices on worker involvement and a well-functioning tripartite system.

So, as the “business case” for good occupational health and safety becomes clearer, there is hope that the world community can make great progress in reducing the daily toll of work-related death, injury and illness.

Corporations feel a growing need to produce public, credible reports on their sustainability. The main current reporting formats include workplace health and safety issues as well as environmental performance and social points such as trade union rights. Injuries and sick leave have long been identified as major costs for companies, but there is also growing evidence that good occupational safety and health management is good for the bottom line.

The same goes for countries attempting to compete in the global economy. It is sometimes claimed that high health and safety standards can reduce competitiveness, so that poorer nations “cannot afford” good health and safety. We now know that this argument is unsound. Recent studies by the World Economic Forum and the Lausanne Institute of Management IMD linked to ILO data have shown that the most competitive countries are also the safest – clearly, competitiveness and on-the-job safety go hand-in-hand.

Last year, on the occasion of the April 28 commemoration, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said “the safety and health of workers is a part and parcel of human security...safe work is not only sound economic policy, it is a basic human right.” On this World Day for Safety and Health at Work, let us dedicate ourselves to a renewed effort to promote safe work worldwide.

Dr. Jukka Takala is the Director of the SafeWork programme at the International Labour Office in Geneva, Switzerland. Further information about World Day for Safety and Health at Work can be found at www.ilo.org/safework/safeday.