Unsafe production is unsustainable production

The World Summit on Sustainable Development will be held in Johannesburg later this year. It provides an excellent opportunity to promote occupational health and safety in a rapidly changing world. It will have to recognize that sustainable development starts at the workplace and that trade unions have a unique contribution to make in addressing this issue.

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As preparations continue around the globe for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, on August 26 - September 4, 2002, workers and trade unions and their social partners are redoubling efforts to draw attention to the thousands of people who die, are injured or become ill every year because of unsafe, unhealthy and unsustainable workplaces.

“Improving Public Health Through Stronger Health and Safety” is this year’s theme for the International Day of Commemoration of Dead and Injured Workers, on April 28. This fits squarely into the message that trade unions will take to Johannesburg: patterns of production that yield such human misery and loss of life can never be considered sustainable.

Workplace health and safety as a sustainable development issue
While the Day of Commemoration and related activities have done much to draw attention to occupational health and safety, many have yet to be convinced that it belongs on the agenda in Johannesburg. Yet the case for occupational health and safety as a tool
for sustainable development is undeniable. It is based on the key role that workplaces play in patterns of production and consumption.

Workplaces are certainly at the centre of production, but they are also major consumers in their own right. They are key determinants of other areas of development, such as energy and land use, and are therefore a logical focus for action on sustainable development, especially where it concerns the social dimension.

**Focus on the workplace.** Workplace-based action, trade unions have argued, exploits the natural synergy between production and consumption, with tremendous potential for “spill-over” between workplace and community. There is a growing acceptance that such public health crises as HIV/AIDS are work-related, and that prevention and treatment can be most effectively handled through programmes that originate in the workplace.

This focus on the workplace, furthermore, extends a tradition in which health and safety were always linked to problems in the larger socio-economic environment. In fact, the origins of the trade union movement itself are based on a collective response by workers to the human toll of unsustainable patterns of production and social life. Workers and their communities have always been amongst the first victims of unsustainable development, bearing the brunt of job dislocation, community upheaval, industrial disease, or death.¹

The first modest steps provided a measure of protection, and a limited right to participate in decision-making. Over the years, however, these have grown into a highly-developed field, as occupational health and safety is today recognized as one of the best examples of industrial relations based upon joint management, and one that is quite naturally expanding to incorporate broader sustainable development issues.

**Focus on the social dimension.** Efforts to gain acceptance for occupational health and safety at the WSSD will call for much greater attention to the social dimension. This is the least-developed area of sustainable development, in spite of the fact that it is one of
the three essential “pillars” in the agreements reached at the previous environment and
development summit in Rio. Until recently, trade unions were often the only group to
draw attention to it, and nine years after Rio, there is still little agreement on “indicators”,
and very little research on the “people effects” it represents.

Trade unions will be seeking the full integration of the social dimension with economic
and environmental proposals, with particular attention to poverty eradication, decent
employment, gender and youth issues and a “Just Transition” – in other words, measures
to protect the income, employment and welfare of those affected by shifts towards greater
sustainability.

Focus on participatory approaches. Nowhere has the efficacy of workplace-based
programmes been better demonstrated than in the area of occupational health and safety,
which trade unions continue to promote as a model for local, national and international
efforts to achieve sustainable development. This model emphasizes participatory and
democratic approaches, making it a “natural fit” for the growing consensus that
sustainable development implies broad-based participation in decision-making and
control by the people and communities most directly affected by development.

Occupational health and safety programmes in tens of thousands of workplaces around
the world have clearly demonstrated how workplace management can be strengthened
through joint assessment, target-setting, implementation and verification. A working
model for ‘workplace democracy’ has been achieved through health and safety
committees, union representatives, works councils, and other joint structures. These are,
Furthermore, committed to education, training and consultations, which are required to
raise the awareness, knowledge and competence that are key to full participation².

The mix of participatory mechanisms includes voluntary agreements, ranging from codes
of conduct to framework collective agreements, based on a broad consensus that these are
part of a mix that must include regulation and standard-setting³.
They all include agreement that worker participation is essential for significant change in
the workplace. It must be combined, however, with broad citizen participation in
community development based on such “indicators” as:

- inclusion of all affected groups
- transparency of decision-making
- access to information at the workplace and the community.

Trade unions have tremendous capacity to contribute to the search for sustainable
development, with breadth in their numbers – over 2 million collective agreements and
2.5 million workplaces – and depth in their structures, programmes and discipline.

They have already demonstrated that structures for health and safety can be successfully
adapted to meet the challenge of sustainable development. For example:

- Occupational health and safety (OHS) committees can be expanded to
  accommodate sustainable development issues in the workplace and community.
- Health and safety representatives or “delegates” may become occupational health,
safety and environment representatives, with advanced training and supportive
community relationships.
- Collective bargaining may be expanded to include “green” provisions reflecting
  the worker’s stake in healthy, sustainable workplaces and social surroundings.
- Union-management arrangements may be expanded to accommodate sustainable
development “partnerships” in the overall state of the work and community.
- Joint management systems assessment, target-setting, implementation, evaluation,
  monitoring and reporting may be expanded to include sustainable development
  aims.
- Occupational health and safety toolkits can be “repackaged” to accommodate
  sustainable development concerns.
- Voluntary agreements, including collective agreements, codes of conduct, and
  other accords, may be expanded to address sustainable development concerns.
- A workplace culture can grow beyond health and safety to accommodate
  sustainable development goals.
- A tradition of public advocacy may be reinvigorated as workers and unions engage in education and orientation of the public on sustainable development issues.

Finally, trade unionism is an international movement, and as such, is equipped to take on the fight for sustainable development within a globalized system of production and consumption. Trade unions have the capacity to communicate their message and mobilize workers around the world, and to work with national governments and international agencies to bring down long-standing barriers.

**Unsustainable workplaces**

Trade unions have approached occupational health and safety (and now sustainable development) as part of an effort to change *relations of work*. Their objectives have always included all aspects of the worker’s life, consistent with the definition of occupational health provided in 1963 by a joint committee of the International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization, namely:

The promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental, and social well-being of workers in all occupations, the prevention among workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions, the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological condition.\(^5\)

This broad-based definition is consistent with the concept of sustainable development, which embraces every sector of economic and social life. As such, it is at odds with occupational health and safety policy that is based on a narrow *contractarian view* that work-related risks are freely-contracted by workers and remain, in one way or another, under their control.\(^6\) It is also at odds with a *cost-benefit approach*, which ignores the inequality of power in the employment relationship.
Trade unions have particularly opposed an allocation of resources to health and safety based on the employer’s willingness to pay for hazard reduction. In most societies, they point out, the majority of “damage costs” related to illness and injury have either been socialized, or imposed directly on workers, their families and communities. Seldom do individual employers have to account for and absorb the true costs of losses they have caused.

Doctrines based on ‘free contracting’ are responsible for higher levels of exposure to hazards in the workplace than would ever be allowed for the general public, based on the presumption that control measures will be triggered when workers demand risk premiums or some other form of compensation in return for exposure.\(^7\)

Much of the resistance to the trade union agenda is based on one simple fact, however; conversion to healthy, safe and environmentally-friendly production is costly, because most workplaces have not been designed with either worker health or sustainable development in mind.

Trade unions, NGOs and other social partners challenge those who claim that the existence of hazards and threats must be established “beyond a reasonable doubt” – i.e. that the absence of strong, conclusive, positive evidence justifies inaction. Trade unions have replied with the precautionary principle, which must be accepted as central to sustainable development. At its simplest, it dictates that the burden of proof that a product or process is safe rests with those who want to introduce it into the workplace or society.

**The changing workplace**
Since Rio, massive reorganizing and restructuring have taken place in the world’s workplace, as *globalization of production and consumption* have increased market pressures for goods and services, at lower prices, within shorter deadlines, as well as cost-cutting measures. Emerging forms of work tend to entail intensification and fragmentation of work, staff reductions, multi-skilling and sub-contracting, speed-up,
irregular hours and shifts, fewer margins for local or personal choice, etc. The effects on workers’ physical and psychological health are immense

**New technology.** Technological innovation alone poses an immense challenge. Trade unions have always encouraged transfer of technology to promote employment and capacity building. At the same time, however, they have drawn attention to its negative effects, especially where it is introduced with little regard for social and environmental impacts. A massive increase in musculoskeletal disorders is evidence of an unsustainable approach to technology, as are the threats to farmers and communities posed by genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and biotechnology, especially in developing countries where the most disastrous effects are likely.

Faced with this reality, trade unions have targeted socio-economic security as a *sine qua non* of worker participation in sustainable development, especially where it portends large-scale dislocation for them and their communities. “Just transition” programmes are pursued by unions for reasons of equity, as well as for their instrumentality in building consensus for change. Towards this end, trade unions have worked closely with the ILO’s Socio-Economic Security Programme (SES), the InFocus Programme that directs attention to the various dimensions of worker security.

The Johannesburg World Summit provides an excellent opportunity to promote occupational health and safety in a rapidly changing world. It can build on a growing consensus that benefits of development must be clearly visible in the form of employment, occupational and public health, and stable communities, especially for developing countries. Research, education, and literature arising from the Summit will do much to draw attention to the social and occupational costs of current patterns of development, decision-making and global trading patterns. The focus, however, must always be on positive alternatives.

**Government, regulation and core labour standards.** Trade unions believe that a rapidly changing and “globalizing” world demands an expanded role for government and
public authority. In particular, they believe that local authorities can play a leading role in promoting functional democracy through increased capacity-building, citizen participation and accountability. They are also committed to public control of such vital areas as water, electricity, and such other services as public transit, and health care.

This approach reaffirms the need for effective regulation of the workplace, i.e. for more, not less, intervention by the state, as only through a vigorous public presence will human labour be taken out of the realm of competition. However, high standards and other regulatory tools require a well-staffed and resourced inspectorate, mandated to take an aggressive stance towards their work.

A strong regulatory regime is also required to ensure minimum worker rights at the workplace, including procedural rights involved in participatory decision-making. In this regard, the April 28 Day of Mourning will once again draw attention to the hundreds of trade unionists who are murdered, injured, beaten, tortured or harassed every year because of their efforts to organize, educate and advance the interests of workers according to the ILO core labour standards, including freedom of association. Those who seek sustainable development must declare this type of victimization and suppression totally unacceptable.

The WSSD must therefore call for recognition of core labour standards, the international instruments that define economic and social rights at work, as basic conditions to the search for sustainable development. It must counter suggestions that these are an issue for industrialized nations only. They are universally applicable, regardless of the stage or nature of national development. The most comprehensive and widely accepted standards are the Conventions and Recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO), in particular the eight Conventions referred to in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

In December 2001, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) declared core labour standards a major trade union priority for the WSSD. Trade unions
want them to be incorporated into all local, national and international planning, with special attention to:

- trade, investment and economic development
- socio-economic security issues such as social and employment transition
- workplace assessment of corporate accountability.

Besides being important in their own right, these standards serve as “enabling rights”, providing access to other important rights; such as the right to participatory decision-making on which occupational health and safety programmes and collective bargaining are based.

Towards this end, trade unions support and seek to strengthen the role of the ILO, as the appropriate agency to promote occupational health and safety, and broader sustainable development issues, alone and through partnerships. As one of the tripartite partners in the ILO, they have reason to be particularly pleased with statements made by Jukka Takala, Director of SafeWork, the ILO Programme on Safety, Health at Work and the Environment, who speaks to a renewed commitment to this area. (See interview of Jukka Takala in this issue). At the same time, other international agencies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) should not be allowed to neglect their responsibilities, as sustainable development demands that the three “pillars” be integrated in decision-making on all matters.

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Note

*Gereluk divides his time between Athabasca University in Canada and the Public Services International in Ferney-Voltaire, France, which he represents on Sustainable Development issues.

Far an authoritative study of the union approach to health and safety through joint worksite committees see Beaumont, Phil B. *Safety at Work and the Unions*. London: Croom Helm, 1983

A multistakeholder consultation in Toronto Canada in 1999 reached agreement following the CSD1998 Dialogue Session on "Business & Industry":

Workplace assessments are key to joint target-setting, monitoring, record-keeping, and implementation, in tandem with enterprise management systems for environment (e.g. Cleaner Production or ISO), health & safety (e.g. ILO Guidelines or Government regulations), internal or 3rd party enterprise audits, and Government programmes (e.g. European *Eco Management and Audit Scheme – EMAS*)

