

A rising toll of industrial deaths and injuries

Terry Cook
12 May 1999

An estimated 1.1 million workers around the world perish in industrial accidents or from industry-related diseases every year, and the toll will worsen dramatically in coming years. That was the warning of a report presented to the International Labour Organisation's World Congress on Occupational Health and Safety in Sao Paulo last month.

This figure already exceeds the average annual number of lives lost from road accidents (999,000), war (502,000), HIV-AIDS (312,000) or violence (563,000). On the whole, 3,000 people are killed at work every day, or two every minute.

One quarter of industrial deaths--more than 250,000 a year--result from exposure to hazardous substances, which cause such disabling illnesses as cancer and cardiovascular, respiratory and nervous system disorders. The ILO predicts that this statistic will double to around 500,000 by the year 2002. There are approximately 160 million new industrial disease cases recorded every year.

In addition, workers annually suffer 250 million occupational injuries causing absence from work. That is, 685,000 accidents occur every day, 475 every minute or eight every second.

More shocking still is the revelation that working children are the victims of 12 million occupational accidents every year and an estimated 12,000 of these are fatal.

Another damning statistic is the number of deaths caused by asbestos. Despite the now well-known deadly effects of this material, workers continue to be contaminated at an alarming rate. Deaths from asbestos-related diseases stand at over 100,000 every year.

The report sheds light on the terrible human cost resulting from the unbridled operations of global capital in the regions known as "developing economies". In their search for ever-cheaper labour, the transnational companies demand that the governments of these

countries grant them extensive concessions, including the dismantling of what little labour legislation exists and the waiving of safety standards.

According to the report: "Intense competition for scarce investment capital contributes to disregard for safety, health and environmental considerations, as large fires caused by toy, textile and similar kinds of factories in developing countries attests."

Although not mentioned in the ILO report, the results of this process were demonstrated six years ago this month when the Kader Industrial Toy Company in Bangkok, Thailand, became the site of the worst industrial fire in history. Those burnt to death included 174 women and 14 men. They could not escape because the factory's emergency doors were either locked, or jammed by the heat, and there were no fire stairs. Scores more workers were badly injured. At that time, 200,000 industry-related injuries and 5,000 deaths were recorded in Thailand every year.

Under conditions of rapid industrialisation in the developing countries, tens of thousands of people are recruited directly from the rural areas. Almost overnight these workers are thrust into the centre of hothouse and highly dangerous working situations with little or no training or work induction.

The ILO statistics outline the magnitude of the resulting carnage. For example, Chinese and Indian fatality rates are twice as high as those in the "advanced industrialised economies". In Latin America and the Caribbean, the death rate is even higher. In the Middle East and Asia (excluding China and India) the rate soars to four times that of the advanced countries.

In what the report refers to as "selectively hazardous jobs" in these regions, working conditions are 10 to 100 times more dangerous. In China, for example, mining accidents continue to claim the lives of more than 10,000 workers every year. Reports of Chinese mine workers killed, maimed or simply referred to as

"missing", appear with sickening regularity.

The construction industry in these regions--bound-up with the breakneck development of the infrastructure needed to service the demands of the newly established conglomerates--is 10 times more dangerous than in the advanced centres. In Eastern Europe, a region where capitalist production relations have been re-established, the death rate is twice as high as in world's "advanced economies".

While claiming that, "the advanced industrial countries have seen a decrease in serious injuries," the report admits that even in these countries many "work-related diseases and injuries are not reported." In addition, new industrial horrors are already emerging with the use of advanced technology. These include musco-skeletal problems, stress and mental disorders, asthmatic and allergic reactions and problems caused by exposure to hazardous and carcinogenic agents, including radiation.

The ILO report makes no reference to the many recent tragedies in the major industrial centres. These include February's boiler explosion at the Ford Rouge power plant in Dearborn, Michigan, where six workers lost their lives.

Over 6,500 American workers were killed in industrial accidents in 1992. Occupational diseases--such as lung diseases and lead poisoning--claimed a further 60,300 lives. Another 13.2 million workers suffered injuries. In 1994 there were 601 industrial fatalities in the state of California alone. A recent Occupational Safety and Health Agency report shows that forklift accidents in the US continue to produce 85 deaths and 34,900 injuries every year.

In Australia, the fatality rate is rising. A statement just released by the National Health and Safety Commission confirmed that 2,900 workers died from industrial accidents and diseases last year. That is 500 more annually than in the early 1990s.

While industrial deaths and injuries are on the increase globally, insurance protection for workers is everywhere being systematically undermined, as employers demand the lowering of workers' compensation premiums. The ILO report shows that despite the rapid expansion of the industrial workforce in the "developing countries" 10 percent or less enjoy any form of accident cover and even in "many

developed countries, coverage against occupational injury and illness may extend to only half the workforce".

The most damning revelation of all is that if the existing health and safety technology, knowledge and expertise were applied, work-related fatalities could be either eliminated or radically reduced. The report states that "some 600,000 lives would be saved every year if the available safety practices and appropriate information were used."

This will not happen because the corporate boardrooms demand ever-greater cost-cutting and efficiency. Yet the ILO report reveals the waste generated by these profit-driven processes. Approximately 4 percent of the world's gross domestic product is eaten up by the cost of industrial diseases, through absences from work, sickness treatment, disability and survivor benefits.

The report states: "The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) lost in work-related injuries and diseases is more than that of the total GDP of Africa, the Arab States and South Asia together and more than all official development assistance to the world's developing countries."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact