

Italy: work-related accidents and deaths on the rise

Rosa Ieropoli
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On-the-job accidents and deaths in Italy increased last year, according to a report recently released by the National Board of Insurance against Accidents in Industrial Work (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro—INAIL). The report contained data on workplace accidents in Italy during the first 11 months of 1999. There were 967,000 reported accidents, a 2.2 percent increase over 1998, and 1,113 deaths.

The construction and agricultural sectors had the highest number of accidents and fatalities, with 83,637 accidents (up 2.6 percent) and 217 deaths in construction, and 83,141 accidents and 134 deaths in agriculture.

Italy has the highest rate of workplace accidents and deaths of any European Union (EU) country, according to another survey published last year by Censis. Data for 1994 showed that the number of accidents per 100,000 workers was 4,641 in Italy, compared to the EU average of 4,539. The number of fatal accidents per 100,000 workers in Italy was 5.3, compared with the EU average of 3.9.

These statistics actually underestimate the number of accidents and deaths, because those suffered by “irregular” workers are not reported to INAIL. As indicated by Gianni Billia, president of the INAIL, many companies hire subcontractors for dangerous jobs to avoid the cost of insurance and enhanced safety measures. The growth of what Billia calls “underground” employment subjects workers to greater dangers and more ruthless exploitation. A large number of immigrant workers, who lack the documents to legally reside in Italy, are particularly vulnerable. They are forced to work without insurance for employers who flaunt safety regulations.

In the region of Lucca, an average of one worker has

died every month since December of 1998. In all of Italy, 84 work-related deaths were recorded in January of 2000.

In the construction industry, workers labor near heavy machinery and electrical power sources under highly unsafe conditions. Blocks of cement and heavy pieces of metal are not properly secured. Many workers have lockers in dangerous areas. Workers suffer horrible deaths, including being crushed by heavy equipment or electrocuted.

To cite some recent cases: on May 30 in Siena, in the commune of Castelnuovo Berardenga, a worker on a construction site, whose name has not been released, was crushed to death by a building wall. On June 8 in Messina, Sicily, two workers, Carlo Berardi and Alessandro Poggi, were electrocuted. Poggi died instantly while Berardi suffered second and third degree burns over 85 percent of his body. On July 10, a 20-year-old building laborer, Antonio D'Amico, died when he was crushed by an elevator while working for the construction company Remartello in the region of Pescara.

The number of fatal accidents recorded for the first five months of 2000 is 502, as compared to 472 for the same period in 1999. This is an increase of 6.3 percent.

The Italian constitution states that safety in the workplace must be guaranteed. The first laws for compulsory insurance against workplace accidents were enacted at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1994 a new law was implemented which incorporated eight European Union directives on health and safety issues, including a provision for safety representatives to be elected in every firm. These measures have proven to be hollow. Since 1994 the number of workplace deaths has increased each year.

Other EU countries with high rates of work-related

injuries and deaths are Spain and Portugal. In all of these countries, the governments are cutting spending on social welfare and enforcement of health and safety laws, so as to conform to the requirements for EU membership. The aim is to make local businesses more competitive on the global market—at the expense of the lives and limbs of working people.



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