

WHO/ILO study says nearly 2 million workers globally die from work-related issues each year

Shannon Jones
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A new report, jointly issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) on work-related deaths for the year 2016, shows that workplace-related diseases and injuries led to the deaths of 1.9 million people in that year.

The WHO/ILO Joint Estimates of the Work-Related Burden of Disease and Injury, 2000-2016, conducted before the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, gives a glimpse of the terrible toll taken on the international working class by the insatiable profit drive of the corporations. Globally, 34.3 out of every 100,000 people over age 15 die each year from work-related causes.

The WHO/ILO study was compiled using strict statistical standards with the collaboration of more than 220 experts from 35 countries. It considers risk factors, including exposure to carcinogens, air pollution, workplace injuries and long working hours. It concluded that long work hours, 55 or more per week, was the largest single contributor to worker mortality, accounting for 750,000 deaths annually. Workplace exposure to air pollution was responsible for 450,000 deaths. Occupational injuries killed 360,000 annually.

The WHO/ILO study examined 41 selected pairs of occupational risk factors and health outcomes. In 2016, 1.88 million deaths and 89.72 million disability-adjusted life years (DALY) were estimated to be caused by 41 occupational risk pairs. Non-communicable disease accounted for 81 percent of occupational deaths. This included 450,000 deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (400,000 deaths) and ischemic heart disease (350,000 deaths), mostly related to long work hours.

In addition to overwork, huge numbers of workers fall victim to numerous other hazards. The next leading cause of workplace deaths are occupational exposure to particulate matter, gases and fumes, and occupational injuries. These categories account for 450,381 and 363,283 deaths each year, respectively.

Of the 363,283 deaths due to occupational injuries, the largest number involved traffic and transport-related causes. Motor vehicle road injuries killed 76,946 annually and pedestrian road injuries 72,157.

The report notes that the actual number of deaths from disease are undercounted, since some categories are not considered in the survey.

While overall occupation-related deaths fell 14 percent between 2000 and 2016, deaths from stroke and heart disease related to overwork rose 19 percent and 41 percent respectively. A disproportionate number of work-related deaths impacted workers in South-East Asia and the Western Pacific, as well as males and people over the age of 54.

Several major industrial countries registered particularly heavy death rates, such as the United Kingdom, with 41.5 deaths per 100,000, and Italy, at 38.2 per 100,000.

Mexican workers work the most hours per year, 2,225 hours, followed by South Korea at 2,113. (World Atlas) However, the United States is the most overworked developed nation in the world, according to many others studies. It is one of the few countries in the world that does not have a maximum workweek, and the only country in the Americas without a national paid parental leave benefit. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, full-time workers worked an average of 43 hours a week in the US, but in many

industries like manufacturing six- or seven-day weeks are common, with workers clocking 60, 70 or even 80 hours.

“All of these deaths are preventable,” International Labour Organization chief Guy Ryder correctly noted in a video message on the report. “We can and we must ensure safe and healthy workplaces for all workers.”

In issuing the report, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, stated, “It’s shocking to see so many people literally being killed by their jobs. Our report is a wake-up call to countries and businesses to improve and protect the health and safety of workers by honouring their commitments to provide universal coverage of occupational health and safety services.”

However, such pleas are sure to fall on deaf ears. Indeed, The WHO/ILO report was barely noted by the corporate media, who are systematically downplaying the impact of a pandemic that continues to kill over 10,000 people each day worldwide.

This annual toll of premature death and terrible suffering has been raised to a new level by the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the deadly virus, in which workplaces, including schools, are a deadly vector of transmission, adds a whole new dimension to future surveys. The pressure by the banks and finance houses to further ramp up the exploitation of workers has only grown under the impact of the global pandemic. Vast amounts have been handed over to the corporations, money that must be repaid by imposing even higher levels of exploitation.

Official estimates place the global death toll from the coronavirus pandemic at 4.7 million, well over twice the annual death toll from work-related causes. However, the official toll from COVID is also likely a vast undercount. The *Economist* published an estimate, based on an examination of death records, that placed the real toll at more than three times the official figure, or over 15 million.

The WHO/ILO report makes clear that the expansion of the workweek is a form of social murder whose impact is quantifiable. Historically, the fight for the shortening of the workday and the workweek has been the focus of bitter struggles by the working class for more than two centuries.

The report demonstrates the inability of the capitalist system, despite vast technological advances, to provide

the basic minimum standards for a healthy work environment. The barbaric conditions laid bare in this report point to the necessity of a global struggle against the source of the problem, capitalism.



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