

# 28 April 2016: Mobilising for strong laws, strong enforcement and strong unions

## The OHS crisis

#IWMD16 28april.org

Every 15 seconds, a worker dies from a work-related accident or disease.

Every 15 seconds, 153 workers have a work-related accident.

Every day, 6,300 people die as a result of occupational accidents or work-related diseases – more than 2.3 million deaths per year. 317 million accidents occur on the job annually.

At least 160 million workers are affected by occupational diseases every year — most of them, due to exposure to chemical agents. Occupational stress and strain injuries also claim a phenomenal toll, making up the largest occupational health challenges in many workplaces.

Behind these figures, there are men and women who lost their lives and health due to greedy and incompetent management decisions and public authorities' failures to regulate and enforce the right to a safe and healthy job.



*"I felt a shock and the floor gave way. People started running in chaos and the ceiling came down. I kept protecting my head, but I got stuck between the rubble. My hand got stuck and I thought I would die. People around died (...). Now I*

*need medical treatment and I have dreams for my child. I need to earn money."* Shila Begum, Rana Plaza survivor: Shila had moved to Dhaka with her daughter in search of work after her husband died and is now unable to work due to the pain she suffers in her arm and the traumatic affects of the day<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cleanclothes.org/safety/ranaplaza/shila-begum-survivors-story>

*"I'm 39 years old and now suffer from panic and anxiety disorder as a result of bullying from two managers in my work place. The screaming in my face, name calling, dirty looks and basically being treated like a nobody for five years has taken its toll. I can no longer work and I'm not sure I ever will again. Bullies have destroyed my life and I've no idea how young kids cope, most of them don't seem to be." Bob<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/bullying-in-work-665391-Jun2014/>



*“Is human life so cheap? We didn’t just lose 301. The whole society here has been left with a deep wound. I waited five days for an identification of my husband’s body from DNA tests.*

*Why is the state protecting the inspectors and not letting them be put on trial? I want to see the state take responsibility for this. Our children are without fathers. I have little confidence in justice in Turkey. As well as my husband last year, seven years ago I lost my brother in a mine accident. No one got a prison sentence. And my aunt’s husband also died in a mine accident before that. There is never justice here”.*  
N.K., wife of a dead Soma miner<sup>3</sup>

*“There are a lot of accidents just because of the lack of oversight and inspection and no investment by private companies in mines.”*  
A.A. Soma mine disaster survivor<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/turkey-mine-disaster-trial-open>

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*“My disease was recognised in 1998 but it was known by my employer since 1983. (...) I worked for twenty-one years with asbestos. When I started I was 18 years old, I was a temp worker in the region and I agreed to go to Ferodo’s because they were offering contracts and paid 40% more. My first year, in 1964, I worked in the “milling room”. We used to handle huge quantities of asbestos and put them in containers. There was so much dust in the workshop that we could not see ten meters afar. The six guys that used to work with me died. I only heard about asbestos in 1998, a year after the ban\*. Media were saying that workers will have cancers, so I went for an MRI and I learned the truth. Since, I live with anxiety that a cancer will develop. Colleagues for which this happened didn’t last more than three months”. Roger Armand, 60 years old, former asbestos-exposed worker and Aldeva (victims’ association) member. He has asbestosis in both lungs.*

\* French Ban



[ADD HERE ONE FROM YOUR COUNTRY/SECTOR]

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# Why must trade unions organise and mobilise on 28th April?

On April 28th, the international trade union movement commemorates those who have lost their lives and health at work and gives a clear message: Remember the dead, fight for the living.

Dying or getting sick at work should not be considered an undesired but inevitable “collateral effect” of production. Victims must be remembered, and most important, we must mobilise to ensure that those responsible (governments, employers) are held accountable for their (lack of) action. 28 April is also a day where we bring our demands and proposals on how to prevent more suffering, as we know most workplace incidents and ill health are preventable.

On 28th April 2016 the international trade union movement will be focusing on the urgent need for governments and employers to support the real solutions to the OHS crisis: regulation, enforcement and rights, as opposed to superficial, individualistic approaches to health at work. Occupational health and safety risks are collective challenges. They require collective solutions.

**The 2016 Theme: “At work, your health and safety depends on Strong laws. Strong enforcement. Strong unions.”**

**Strong laws** because across the world workers either have inadequate legal protection from potentially deadly risks to their health at work, or existing safety protection is under threat from governments intent on deregulation. There are also moves to “privatise” regulation through the use of health and safety standards set by private bodies such as ISO.

The figures related to the OHS crisis are first and foremost the consequence of “laissez - faire” policies by governments who have decided to treat occupational health and safety as a “burden for competitiveness”, ignoring their duty to protect citizens health and lives as well as the terrible impact workplace accidents and diseases have for the overall progress of a country.

**Strong enforcement** because we know that, even if we have health and safety laws in place, these are of no use if they are not enforced. Many countries pay lip service to legislation but allow employers to ignore their obligations and put the health and safety of their workforce at risk. The degradation of labour inspectorates is part of these worrying trends.

The degradation of enforcement mechanisms on occupational health and safety, in particular due to limited and decreasing funds allocated to labour inspectorates, but in some countries also due to corruption, lack of training of inspectors, or no proactive efforts to educate workers on their rights and grievance mechanisms, is unacceptable. For good occupational health and safety, we need them to be stronger, resourced and sound.

**Strong unions** because they are the best protection for workers. Workplaces that have strong union representation typically have much lower fatality, injury and ill-health rates than those that do not. Yet many countries are bringing in anti-union laws, are trying to replace unions with in-house “staff associations” hand-picked by employers or introducing other forms of “participation” as a way of keeping out unions.

All too often, current production systems are organised in such a way that workers are expected to absorb pressures for higher productivity by accepting less protection and more job insecurity, often risking their health and lives for a wage. Acting collectively to combat this through trade unions is a first step towards a safer workplace. In addition, scientific evidence and workers’ perception show that when workers are represented by trade unions on occupational health and safety issues, their working environment is significantly better than where they are left alone with their concerns.

Union action on occupational health is oriented towards risk elimination and control, and this basically means working on prevention. For years, unions have been working at the workplace to identify problems, raise awareness among workers, elaborate proposals, negotiate agreements, and verify their enforcement and efficiency

## What do unions do on 28th April?

Thousands of actions take place every year on 28th April. Some trade unions hold hundreds of events across their respective countries, others hold highly visible seminars, rallies, family gatherings, memorial services, demonstrations and flashmobs. Some simply organise minutes of silence in workplaces. The key here is to organise AND to communicate about it.

Announce actions, post pictures and posters using

Twitter: #wmd16

Facebook: search 28 April in the search bar for the dedicated 28th April page.

Send us an email to: [Anabella.roseberg@ituc-csi.org](mailto:Anabella.roseberg@ituc-csi.org)

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