

## **Will the financial crisis push us back in the struggle for safer and healthier workplaces?**

By **Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri**, Director - *SafeWork Programme*

We are living in a world of constant change. The organization of work is changing. The attitudes of workers are changing. The content of jobs is changing. But we are still firmly determined to keep workplaces as safe and healthy as possible.

Even before the financial crisis, the globalization of the world economy had a radical effect on every economic sector and on every region in the world. This brought about immense changes in organizations and enterprises.<sup>1</sup> The global financial crisis is having a further impact on the safety and health of workers throughout the world. Limited resources force enterprises to downsize production, cut jobs, lay off workers in large numbers, increase part-time and temporary work, and further outsource their production. As a result of these trends, workers are subject to serious psychosocial risks, especially because of the fear of dismissal and of future unemployment, of changes in working time patterns due to irregular working hours, and of increased job demands because of the intensification of work.

In addition, enterprises often cut down resources allocated for safety and health and lay off safety and health specialists. Enforcement agencies, labour inspectorates and occupational safety and health services have to operate with limited resources. Poor working conditions and dangerous safety and health situations can lead to a sharp rise in work accidents, injuries and fatalities, endangering the lives of millions of women and men and causing ill-health in people who will suffer from unemployment.<sup>2</sup>

Circumstances may force many workers to accept precarious work and jobs in the informal economy, often in low-skilled occupations where safety and health is ignored. They may also become migrant workers. The increase in precarious working conditions will pose an additional risk of accidents and ill-health in micro-enterprises in the informal economy, where the formal management structure is poor and economic survival is the first priority.

Organizational change and restructuring make the management of safety and health difficult and create uncertainties for the discharging of responsibilities. Reduced production reverses the tight schedules and peaks of intensive work in production and

<sup>1</sup> R. Wynne, R. Grundemann. [\*New approaches to improve the health of a changing workforce\*](#). Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. Luxembourg, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> B.O. Alli. *Fundamental principles of occupational health and safety*. International Labour Office. Geneva, 2008.

10 April 2009

services which were prevalent before the crisis. Some employees will come under pressure to accept additional workloads and extra hours to compensate for the lack of human and financial resources. Such situations tend to result in additional physical and mental stress and burnout. Overall, the management of traditional hazards and risks can be weakened by the requirement for necessary reductions in production costs. This is often the case in small-scale enterprises with a lack of resources and know-how in the management of occupational safety and health (OSH), which often consider safety and health as a cost rather than an investment in productivity.

The potential impact on the health of workers goes beyond the victims of downsizing or the remaining workers. It also affects workers' families and the communities in which the restructuring occurs. The incidence of work accidents and diseases is expected to rise because of the present economic crisis, as some companies and governments are tempted to lessen OSH standards<sup>3</sup>. Naturally, ill-health due to unemployment will also increase.<sup>4</sup>

### **The ILO's position is clear and firm**

Social protection should be preserved for the millions of people who have lost, are about to lose or will in the future lose their jobs. Social protection should also be retained for those working extra shifts and overtime to compensate for the diminishing workforce and the increasing workload. While many international organizations and national governments are trying to find effective and sustainable solutions to the problems caused by the current crisis, we must continue to stress what could easily be forgotten during such times but which is part and parcel of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda: the right of everyone to a safe and healthy working environment.<sup>5</sup> This right should not be compromised during times of financial constraints. We need to make sure that the right to a safe and healthy working environment is not eliminated from national and enterprise agendas while waiting for better times. It is precisely this way of thinking that has led the world to where it is today: the thinking behind the short-term business model. Following this model in the implementation of safety and health rules would surely backfire in the future. While it is true that the countries of the world should concentrate at the present time on the restoration of sustainable productivity and equity, they need to do this with full respect for labour standards, including those related to occupational safety and health. Only this will ensure that people live socially and economically productive lives.

As the Director of the ILO Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment, I strongly believe we have a moral obligation that reaches beyond economic issues: a moral obligation that considers all avoidable damage to life, health and safety as unacceptable.

---

<sup>3</sup>National Accident Helpline. [Bosses Ignoring Health and Safety](#). 19.02.2009.

<sup>4</sup> A. Neal, M.A. Griffin, P.M. Hart. "The impact of organizational climate on safety climate and individual behavior", in *Safety Science*. 2000, n34, p99-109.

<sup>5</sup> ILO. [Beyond deaths and injuries: The ILO's role in promoting safe and healthy jobs](#). Geneva, 2008.

10 April 2009

The ILO's comparative advantage lies to a large extent with its social protection objectives. The Organization stands firmly by this core element of its mandate to protect workers against hazards to their safety and health.<sup>6</sup> We believe that only a safe and healthy workforce can build a sustainable economy. The legitimate questions are always the same: Is it acceptable to pay the human costs of accidents, injuries and workers' burnout? Hasn't the world learned the lesson that it is better to act than to react? It is high time to apply a preventive approach to all sectors of the economy. We can then prevent a truly human crisis.

The message from ILO SafeWork is unwavering and straightforward: today, more than ever, there must be **no compromise** over the safety and health of workers.

---

<sup>6</sup> ILO. *Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health: Conclusions adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 91st session*. Geneva, 2003.