

Making a killing

GLOBALISATION MAKES IT A LEGAL DUTY TO PUT PROFITS BEFORE SAFETY

Do you feel less secure, less able to speak up about workplace safety concerns? You are not alone. Globalisation of the economy could leave us all more vulnerable.

In June 1999 the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated 1 million workers die work-related deaths worldwide each year and hundreds of millions more are harmed by their jobs (*Hazards* 67).

Globally, over one-third of cancer deaths (34 per cent), a quarter of accident deaths (25 per cent), a fifth

of chronic respiratory disease deaths (21 per cent) and one-in-seven cardiovascular disease deaths (15 per cent) are work-related.

WHO/ILO warn that the evolving nature of work is generating new occupational hazards, including musculoskeletal problems, stress and mental problems, asthmatic and allergic reactions and problems caused by exposure to hazardous and carcinogenic agents, such as asbestos, radiation and chemicals.

Globalisation - the rise of the transnational corporations, the increased mobility of jobs and capital and a switch from secure to contingent labour (temporary workers, agency staff, short-term contracts) - has created a world where the effectiveness of health and safety initiatives in one nation - legislative or trade union - is being eroded.

According to Joseph LaDou of the International Center for Occupational Medicine, San Francisco: "Of the world's hundred largest economies, 51 are not countries but corporations. General Motors' annual sales are greater than the gross national products of Denmark and Norway. Ford and Exxon are nearly as large. Phillip Morris has a bigger economy than Singapore.

"While the world's 200 largest corporations account for one per cent of the world's workforce, they account for 28 per cent of the world's economic activity... Multinational corporations are the most powerful political institutions of our time."¹

There has to be implications for both workplace and public health when a tobacco multinational, Phillip Morris, has more economic clout than one of the most successful of the

"Asian Tiger" economies.

There is a sense these companies are not multinationals, but supranationals, above national laws, including health and safety statutes. Even when they obey the law, they can cherry pick which laws they obey and where.

When chemical multinational DuPont undertook to develop a new pesticides plant it sought to direct operations from and bank profits in the US, have its production facility in Goa and its legal liabilities in the UK, where environmental law would be more accommodating than in the US or India in the event of a Bhopal-style incident².

The emergence of formalised continental trade blocs and, since 1994, the World Trade Organisation, has provided a business-friendly route for the multinationals to protect their interests at the expense of workers' health and the environment.

US multinational Ethyl Corporation found the threat of action under North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) rules was enough to keep its toxic exports safe.

A Canadian ban on imports of the fuel additive MMT, a neurotoxin linked to Parkinsonism and other health effects, was withdrawn after the company threatened to sue for "potential" lost profits. The company demanded and won millions in damages courtesy of the Canadian taxpayer³.

The Canadian government, acting on behalf of Canada's asbestos multinationals, is in on the act. It is using the World Trade Organisation's dispute settlement procedure - an unaccountable free trade "court" - to challenge a ban on asbestos

introduced in France.

Canada's intention is to use free trade rules to protect global markets in asbestos, the best known and most potent industrial killer in history, from democratically agreed measures to ban the fibre on public health grounds (*Hazards* 62-68). The outcome of the WTO case is expected in March 2000.

Whose trade organisation?, a detailed analysis of the operation of WTO⁴, warns: "Domestic standards on health, the environment and public safety that are higher than international ones must pass a set of stringent tests in order *not* to be considered trade barriers. Meanwhile, there is no *floor* on health and safety that all countries must meet; there is no requirement that international standards be met, only that they cannot be exceeded."

Reduced union density and power has gone hand-in-hand with globalisation, and has left workers more physically and economically vulnerable.

But union practice has changed to meet the challenge of globalisation, a shift spearheaded by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) - a confederation of national union centres including the UK TUC.

ICFTU's "New strategy for trade and development", a paper for the 1999 WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle, included arguments that "adequate occupational health and safety standards" should be built into every aspect of WTO's work together with "formal recognition of the importance of the precautionary principle in environmental and health-related trade questions, preventing hazards at work"⁵.

Practical union initiatives range from "cybercampaigns" like the international union attack on safety and labour abuses by the mining multinational RTZ⁶, to the International Transport Federation (ITF) annual day of action against long working hours for professional drivers. In Europe, unions are organising a strain injuries prevention campaign, the first ever continent-wide union safety campaign (*Hazards* 68).

The sector-based international union federations have negotiated global recognition agreements including health and safety clauses. Recent agreements have been struck between the building workers' union federation IFBWW and Swedish multinational IKEA, the foodworkers' union federation IUF and French-based food giant Danone and between the chemical and energy unions' federation ICEM and Norwegian oil multinational Statoil.

In March 1999, tyre and rubber unions from Goodyear plants in 16 countries on five continents, all ICEM affiliates, formed a global union network with workplace health and safety as the group's top priority. The unions agreed to create an international database on Goodyear's operations and working conditions.

There is a marked trade union effect on safety - organised workplaces are safer workplaces - so if union influence is reduced, workplace health and safety is likely to be compromised (*Hazards* 66).

The 21st century safety challenge is to protect trade unions and to organise globally, so workers have the power to protect themselves.

NOTES

1. *The role of occupational medicine in the new industrial era*. European Journal of Oncology, vol.4, no.2, pages 101-110, 1999.
2. *Migration of industrial hazards*. International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health, vol.1, no.2, 1995.
3. *Protecting free trade will hurt workers*. Workers' Health International Newsletter, no.54, July-December 1998.
4. *Whose trade organisation?* (see resources).
5. *A new strategy for trade and development*. ICFTU statement on the agenda for the third ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation, Seattle, USA, 30 November-3 December 1999. Available on the ICFTU website: <http://www.icftu.org>
6. RTZ cybercampaign. See ICEM website: <http://www.icem.org>

RESOURCES

Workers' Health International Newsletter. The only international union health and safety magazine. Biannual, £15.00/year. Details from Hazards.

Whose Trade Organisation? Corporate globalisation and the erosion of democracy. Highly recommended guide to the activities of the World Trade Organisation. ISBN 1-58231-001-7. Details from: Public Citizen, 1600 20th St NW, Washington DC 20009, USA. <http://www.citizen.org>

International Union Rights. Special issue on health and safety. Vol.6, no.4, 1999. £3.00. ICTUR, UCATT House, 177 Abbeville Road, London SW4 9RL. <http://www.ictur.labourmet.org>

Beyond the chemical century: Restoring human rights and preserving the fabric of life. Excellent US report on the damage done to workers, communities and the environment by the global chemical industry. Details from: Gary Cohen, Environmental Health Fund, 41 Oakview Terrace, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130, USA. [gcohen.igc.org](http://www.gcohen.igc.org) The report can be downloaded from the web: <http://home.earthlink.net/~gnproject/chemcentury.htm>

Building workers' human rights into the global trading system. ICFTU. The international union case for global and binding core labour standards. From: ICFTU, Bd Roi Albert II, 5, Bte 5, B-1210 Brussels, Belgium. The report can be downloaded from the web: <http://www.icftu.org> ICFTU Global Compact website: <http://www.icftu.org/english/tncs/gcindex.html>

UNION CARBIDE: US profits, Indian victims

Among women who were pregnant and were exposed to the Bhopal gas cloud, 43 per cent aborted. In the years that followed, the spontaneous abortion rate remained four to 10 times worse than the national India average. Only 50 per cent of pre-pubescent girls exposed to the gas had normal menstrual cycles.

Bhopal campaigner Satinath Sarangi, Pesticides News No.46, December 1999.



photo: Andy Watterson

photo: Henk du Plessis



CAPE:
UK profits;
South African
victim Hendrik
Springbok, 58,
has asbestosis:
"I am angry

with Cape because my health is gone. I worked as a sample boy and they never warned us, and they never gave us any protective clothing. There was a lot of dust. It looked as if we were covered in snow. It is a tragedy. I am too young to die now." UK multinational Cape plc is seeking to block 2,000 South African victims of its asbestos operations from seeking compensation through the UK courts (see page 8).

THOR:
UK profits;
South African
victims
Twenty workers
employed by
the British
multinational
Thor Chemical
Holdings Ltd were severely poisoned by
mercury. Four died. Albert Dlamini was
hospitalised after suffering mercury burns
to his foot at the Cato Ridge, South
Africa, plant. In 1997 he told *Hazards*:

"Working for Thor has destroyed my life." Thor denied liability but paid affected workers a total of £1.3 million in compensation (*Hazards* 59).



photo: Andy Watterson

UNION CARBIDE:
US profits; Indian victims
Activists commemorate
the 15th anniversary of
the 3 December 1984
Bhopal disaster, when
over half a million people
were exposed to a leak of
toxic methyl isocyanate.
At least 16,000 died;
thousands more still
suffer (see page 8).
The burning effigy
represents Richard
Anderson, the Chief
Executive Officer of the
US-based multinational
Union Carbide, owner
of the pesticide plant.