



22 March 2021

Safety and health is a Fundamental Right at Work

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) have estimated that 2.8 million people die each year from work-related illness and injury. The latest new data and estimates being prepared indicate that the toll caused by work-related diseases is increasing from 2.3 million fatal cases to close to 2.6 million.

In addition we have estimated some 60,000 Covid-19 work-related deaths occurred in 2020 and the numbers continue to grow. We anticipate that work-related Covid-19 disease cases will continue to be significantly under-diagnosed and under-reported, for various reasons. The share of infections at workplaces is close to 20% of all infections based on Italian compensation data. These data come not only from the highly exposed health workers but cover a large number of jobs and occupations, which have a significantly elevated risk. Such workers include painters and cleaners at construction sites, drivers, several industry sector workers in mining, manufacturing, and food industries, teachers, day care workers, and other service sector workers.

The numbers of fatal injuries are also not decreasing and, in particular, the numbers of permanent and temporary disabilities caused by accidents are expected to be much higher than has been estimated so far, as has been shown for Europe.

These negative outcomes create a massive social and economic burden. The ILO and ICOH have calculated the economic burden of poor occupational safety and health practices to be 3.9% of global Gross Domestic Product, GDP, each year, equating to more than three thousand billion USD annually. This production loss - or 'non-obtained' GDP- could cover the **total** combined GDP of some 130 poorest countries in the world.

However, these studies are based just on the production losses caused by death, disability and disease. Taken into account, the premature retirement due to health disorders and injuries may shorten the work-life expectancy by more than 10 years – and the related 10 years' worth of GDP is lost. 'Presenteeism' – being sick while still at work – adds to the costs. The annual value has been calculated in a detailed way to be more than 10% of the annual GDP in one member state, based on all available accurate data. In addition the associated social value is immeasurable.

From the ethical and sustainable goals point of view we need to keep in mind that practically all resources that we have at our disposal, such as food, housing and infrastructure, schools, health providers, and social security are produced by the workforce. The full global GDP - $87.3 * 10^{12}$ (million millions) - is produced by work. The need to promote social justice and decent and safe work is reflected also in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and not just SDGs 3 (Good health and well-being) and 8 (Decent work and economic growth); the workforce is involved in practically all UN SDGs.

“Safety and health at work is not only sound economic policy, it is a basic human right...”
(Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations).

The ICOH strongly encourages the Governing Body of the ILO to take further action to implement the International Labour Conference outcomes.

Safety and health is a Fundamental Right at Work

ICOH urges the ILO Governing Body to take action to progress the decision of the ILO Centenary Conference of 2019, to have a confirmation that safety and health is recognised as a Fundamental Right at Work and placed on the agenda of the 2021 International Labour Conference.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jukka Takala', is positioned above the name of the signatory.

Dr. Jukka Takala, President of ICOH