

Occupational safety and health in times of crisis: “We have to invest in a healthy workforce now”

More than 300 participants from some 60 countries discussed this week the potential impact of the global economic crisis on occupational safety and health (OSH) at an international conference hosted by the ILO in Düsseldorf on “Implementing Occupational Safety and Health Standards Globally”. ILO Online asked Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri, Director of the ILO’s Safe Work Programme, to draw some conclusions from the meeting.

DÜSSELDORF (ILO Online) – ILO Online: How is the global economic and jobs crisis affecting occupational health and safety at work?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: The financial crisis has become a factor of concern for the health and safety of workers around the world. On the one hand, workers have to deal with the fear and stress of losing their jobs. On the other hand, we might expect a reduction in resources allocated to safety and health. Enforcement agencies, labour inspectorates and occupational safety and health services may also have to operate with limited resources. The result could be a sharp rise in work accidents, injuries and fatalities and work-related stress – although some sectors, particularly those affected by rising unemployment like the construction sector, may actually see a decline of accidents as a recent pilot study of the International Social Security Association (ISSA) shows.

ILO Online: Several participants to the Conference addressed the impact of crisis and restructuring on the mental health of employees. What were their conclusions?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: Mental ill-health is on the rise. In Europe, more and more early retirements today are based on mental ill-health. In extreme cases stress can even lead to suicide, and some enterprises are being asked to prepare stress prevention programmes at work. The reasons for this trend include information overload, intensification of work and time pressure, high demands on mobility and flexibility, being constantly “on call” due to mobile phone technology, and last but not least the worry of losing one’s job.

ILO Online: Do work-related illnesses and injuries have a strong negative impact on workers as well as on the economy?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: Our estimate is that roughly four per cent of the annual global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or US\$1.25 trillion, is lost due to direct and indirect costs of occupational accidents and diseases such as lost working time, workers’ compensation, the interruption of production and medical expenses. Even in industrialized countries, the overall cost of work-related accidents and diseases is still very high: in the European Union it is estimated at 2.6 to 3.8 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

But absenteeism due to work-related illness and injury is only the tip of the iceberg. Another form of loss is incurred by “presenteeism”, a term used to describe the phenomenon of ill employees who show up for work but cannot perform effectively owing to their illness. Fearing for their jobs, many employees no longer dare to take sick leave. Some specialists

estimate the costs incurred by “presenteeism” are three times higher than those caused by absenteeism as a result of illness and injuries.

ILO Online: Can labour inspection play an important role in preventing work-related accidents and diseases?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: The world’s 120,000 labour inspectors face daunting challenges: preventing more than 2 million fatal occupational diseases and accidents each year and contributing to the fight against HIV/AIDS, child labour and forced labour. The ILO has set “reasonable benchmarks” for the number of labour inspectors in relation to workers in a recent report (one inspector to 10,000 workers in industrial market economies and one to 40,000 in less developed countries), but many countries still fail to reach these benchmarks.

The ILO calls for an Integrated Labour Inspection System (ILIS) to integrate administrative, procedural and technical elements into a holistic, coherent and flexible approach to labour inspection: from the global policy level down to the operational level in the enterprise where the quantity and quality of inspections can be significantly improved. The bedrock for such reforms is ILO Convention No. 81 on labour inspection in industry and commerce. With 135 ratifications, it is one of the 10 most ratified ILO conventions to date and serves as a good international guide to secure the enforcement of the legal provisions relating to conditions of work and the protection of workers.

ILO Online: What is the ILO’s message regarding occupational safety and health in times of crisis?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: First, everyone has the right to a safe and healthy working environment. That is what the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda states and it is something we deeply believe in. This is especially true in a time of crisis. It should not be an excuse to lessen decent working conditions, including occupational safety and health standards, but an opportunity to promote them. Second, prevention is also good business. In the long term, investments in the physical and mental health of staff will always pay off: companies will save more from reducing the need for continued wage payments during illness than they spend on OSH measures. According to one study, companies gain three dollars for every dollar they spend on preventive measures.

ILO Online: What is the potential long-term impact of the economic crisis on occupational safety and health?

Dr. Sameera Al-Tuwaijri: If companies cut back now on occupational safety and health, they will pay the price in the not too distant future. And with demographic ageing, we will all have to work longer and ensure that the health of the workforce will permit us to do so. If we fail to invest in a healthy workforce now, we will not have a sufficient number of healthy staff in the future.

“Implementing Occupational Safety and Health Standards Globally”, Düsseldorf, 3-6 November 2009. For further information, please visit the conference website on <http://www.ilosafetyconference2009.org/es/index.html> which includes the background documentation prepared for the event.