

Guidelines for trade union development work on the internal and external environment

Adopted by the board 25 August 1998

A good working environment and opportunities for in-service development and training feature amongst the demands put forward by the trade union movement on behalf of their members throughout the world. A committed attitude on the part of employees and their unions towards their environment and working conditions is fundamental to the development of worldwide democracy.

The trade union movement's basic aim is to place the people and democracy at the hub of working life; democracy and trade union activities have achieved considerable advances towards improving working life for people in many countries.

In the modern world of global economy and multinational companies, an excessively profit-oriented philosophy has priority over social considerations and political and economic democracy. The main challenge for trade unions is to protect the interest of the people and orient the development of working life towards cooperation between employers and the employed. This cooperation is the basis of modern, humane and successful enterprises.

The ability to take part in and influence every aspect of working life within the enterprise and regulate working life at all levels throughout the enterprise is now a key issue, particularly in the working environment. Large areas of working life are still governed by hierarchic organisation models based on the old military system of 100 years ago; this is true even in peaceful work areas such as the Swedish health care system.

Workers are daily exposed to considerable dangers in the physical working environment; many life-endangering production methods are still in use, especially in small industries and in the informal sector in developing countries. Repetitive physical tasks which over time overstrain particular muscles, causing irreparable damage now affect not only men but also an increasing number of women in industry and service professions. New materials and methods bring with them new environmental risks from toxic products, for example.

Apart from hazards in the physical working environment, psychological and social stress is on the increase, in the form of job insecurity, compulsory part-time work or overtime, antisocial working hours, stress, harassment and lack of development opportunities. The family's health and happiness, working conditions, social security, support, etc., must be taken into consideration in this respect.

The working environment clearly reflects important differences between the situations of workers in different countries. For example, 90% of all injuries and deaths caused by exposure to chemical pesticides in agriculture occur in developing countries, although only 20% of the world's total production of such substances is used in these countries. In countries with high levels of unemployment, a large informal sector and weak trade unions, little or no attention is paid to accident risks; attrition injuries and accidents in the workplace are rife.

For a number of reasons, the working conditions of many employees in many parts of the world must change:

1. Workers exposed to unhealthy internal and external environments and their families must be protected.

2. The probability of workers in more developed countries and enterprises maintaining and defending their healthy working environment is seriously threatened if standards do not improve throughout the world and in countries and enterprises which compete on the same market.

3. The environment of all living creatures on our planet is seriously threatened unless manufacturing processes, transport, services, etc., function in more environmentally sustainable ways, with greater attention paid to employees' and consumers' health and their quality of life in the future.

The working environment has always been one of the trade union movement's main interests. Over more than one hundred years, the Swedish unions developed knowledge, experience and, above all, an organisation which demands a healthy environment to live and work in.

Surveillance of the working environment is one of the basic services the unions offer their members, in addition to salary and wage negotiation and agreements, insurance, study opportunities, etc.

All unions within the LO, the TCO and their respective unions and federations have appointed environmental officers, many of whom are experienced resource persons with the capacity to participate in and contribute to development cooperation in other countries.

We believe that the working environment is an important point of departure for further engagement with the environment, as we become increasingly aware of the close links between the internal and external environment.

At the same time, we believe that international trade union cooperation, as stated in our bylaws, must strive towards creating strong, independent and democratic trade unions, and avoid undertaking "general" environment projects which could be financed from other sources.

Strong trade unions are often what are needed if proper attention is to be paid to the internal and external environment. Our efforts to create strong and effective trade unions are vital to achieving satisfactory internal and external environmental conditions.

Experience of environmental projects in international trade union cooperation over the last 20 years shows that education in "whistle-blower" issues, such as asbestos, can trigger effective trade union activities which in turn lead to vital regulation and prohibition of the use of asbestos.

Sustainable environmental work must be backed by the development of permanent education and environmental surveys. In most countries, however, the working environment is not considered a trade union issue; it is the preserve of engineers and supervisors, and this creates difficulties. Barriers of ignorance, machismo and cultural problems are other areas which must be penetrated in the future.

Some guiding principles for working environment projects within international trade union development work are:

1. Work on the working environment must be seen as a trade union issue and work on environmental issues should go hand-in-hand with activities aimed at developing strong, democratic and independent trade unions. Unions must develop efficient working environment departments to ensure continuity of environmental surveillance.

2. We must avoid making work environment issues more complicated than they already are. A separate system of "expert governance" and "working environment policemen" or other activities parallel to the unions' work and their members must be avoided

3. Working environment issues must adhere to ILO conventions, national legislation in force, national two or three- party agreements, working environment standards and social paragraphs in trade agreements, as well as activities and campaigns undertaken by the global union federations.

4. Projects on working environment issues or environmental components of other projects must follow the principle that these issues concern two or three parties. Employers and authorities have a responsibility to ensure that measures oriented towards surveillance of the working environment and funding are determined jointly by the parties and authorities concerned.
5. The possibility of using working environment issues as an entry to countries where trade union work is restricted should be considered, as these issues may be less controversial than the struggle for higher salaries, wages and collective agreements. Good work on working environment issues may improve the union's legitimacy; goodwill between trade union members and society at large can create bridges to employers and authorities.
6. Although many countries have surprisingly strict legislation on the working environment, it is seldom enforced. However, unions may use existing legislation as a basis for their own working environment organisation and demand development of cooperation between the parties on the labour market. This means that unions must work towards democracy, information, justice, equality and internal structure with boards. Work on the working environment thus becomes part of the general effort to create stronger trade unions.
7. One of the motives for increasing preventive work on health and safety matters is the heavy cost to society and individuals of accidents, professional illnesses, production loss, etc. These costs must be made visible; the insurance system of each country could play an important role in this.
8. We must be very aware of the fact that the working environment, work organisation and developing competence are becoming increasingly important in trade union work. The psycho-social working environment also attracts much more attention, over problems such as obligatory part-time work, anti-social working hours, compulsory overtime and double shifts. All this can be addressed within projects on the working environment and organisation.
9. Working environment projects should if possible engage the Swedish unions actively through resource persons who can contribute their personal experience and knowledge but also learn from the experience of sister organisations around the world.
10. Cooperation with other institutions and actors on working environment issues should be encouraged to create networks which facilitate the achievement of objectives.
11. Cooperation with organisations representing consumers' and the general public's interest in the environment should be exploited; wider knowledge of environment issues and globalisation leads in this direction. Alliances with Fair Trade, environmental certification of wood, etc., offer interesting possibilities.
12. The use of the Internet and up-to-date information technology in international working environment programmes should be investigated and used where appropriate.
13. We must make the most of global working environment projects, although the danger of greater bureaucracy and higher costs in extensive projects should be carefully evaluated. Trade unions must be involved in this type of projects with affordable methods and budgets which allow them to implement and develop their project further, from their own limited resources.
14. Wherever possible, concrete action plans for environmental or work environment projects should be designed within each project and cooperating organisation, just as Swedish and global unions have their own policies and plans.
15. Evaluation and follow-up of working environment projects will be used for future improvement and renewal of these guidelines.