

# **OHSEI, the Asian Workers' Occupational Health, Safety and Environment Institute, and Asbestos**

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[paper submitted – author could not attend]

## **What is OHSEI?**

OHSEI, the Asian Workers' Occupational Health, Safety and Environment Institute, was established in February 2000 and is based in Bangkok.

OHSEI is the occupational health, safety and environment agency for the International Unions in Asia. Its member organisations are:

- ICFTU-APRO
- Education International (EI)
- International Federation of Building and Woodworkers (IFBWW)
- International Metalworkers Federation (IMF)
- International Textile, Garment and Leatherworkers Federation (ITGLWF)
- Public Services International (PSI)
- Union Network International (UNI)

Mr. Noriyuki Suzuki, General Secretary, ICFTU-APRO, is the Chairperson of OHSEI and Balan Nair, Regional Representative Asia & Pacific IFBWW, is the Vice-Chairperson of OHSEI.

## **Mission**

- To improve the working conditions of workers throughout Asia.
- To promote environment-friendly and sustainable industry.

## **Core-activities**

- OSH training and research throughout Asia.
- An annual Theme Conference for trade unions, academics and NGOs in the region.
- Dissemination of information via website and newsletters.
- Developing and maintaining active networks in support of OSHE activities.
- Fundraising

## **Website**

OHSEI's website ([www.Ohseinstitute.org](http://www.Ohseinstitute.org)) provides regular information on OHSEI activities.

On the website are useful links including a number designed for the industry sectors of our member organisations.

OHSEI has also uploaded all of its training materials. It also provides OHSEI column materials that can be copied and placed in a union newsletter.

Every two months, an e-newsletter is emailed to subscribers.

## **Agreement with the Thai Ministry of Labour**

In October 2003, OHSEI signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Thai Ministry of Labour, the National Association of Professional Safety Officers, and the semi-Government organization responsible for organizing occupational health and safety training programs. Under this agreement training will be provided on a fee-for-attendance basis (paid by employers) for worker and supervisor representatives on Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees.

## **Justification – the hard facts**

- Every year, 1.2 million people die of work-related accidents and diseases.
- By conservative estimates, 250 million workers suffer from work-related accidents and 160 million workers fall ill each year due to workplace hazards.
- Death and injuries take a particularly heavy toll in developing countries, where large numbers of workers are concentrated in activities such as agriculture, logging, fishing and mining – some of the world's most hazardous industries.
- In many developing countries, fatality rates among workers are four times higher than that in industrialised countries, and some clearly hazardous jobs are 10-100 times riskier in poorer than richer countries.
- The poorest, least protected – often women, children and migrants – are also among the most affected.
- Micro and small enterprises account for a large proportion of enterprises where conditions are often very poor and where the workers are often excluded from all labour protection.

*Source: ILO*

Although working environment improvement has been recognised in many developing countries over the years, working environment concerns are in the infant stage in developing countries.

However, most developing countries have – and have had for several years – an institutional framework and regulations governing labour protection and/or safety and health at work. Yet the impact on the general working environment situation has been limited due to insufficient stakeholder capacity, scarce resources, low awareness among employers and workers, as well as low political

priority. Moreover, regulations are frequently limited in scope, outdated and – more importantly – subject to limited enforcement.

## **Poverty reduction**

It should be obvious for all stakeholders that there is a clear relationship between decrease of poverty, sustainable development and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH).

The occurrence of serious accidents or diseases will often cause drastic and negative changes in the socio-economic situation of the affected household, the community and the entire economy.

The reality for the majority of the workers in developing countries is that they are left without much protection and without awareness of the potential risks and hazards they are exposed to. The situation is much worse for people working in the informal economy, as provisions in the legislation often stipulate that only employed workers are covered by the relevant Act.

## **The Unions role**

The establishment of a sustainable labour market including significant improvement of safety and health standards cannot be achieved without strengthening the unions' capacity in the field of OSH. The Unions' mission is to safeguard workers' interests. Thus they must have the capacity to carry out research and documentation activities, capacity to participate in tri- and bipartite relations and capacity and resources to conduct training and advocacy activities.

Various surveys indicate that the unions' activities in the field of OSH are often limited to training activities for its members and the perception of Occupational Safety and Health is limited to safety issues pertaining to prevention of accidents related to machinery.

The basis for trade unions is to safeguard their members' interests; to do this they need to participate proactively in tri- and bipartite relations and adopt and implement adequate strategies, that reflect the entire defined scope of Occupational Safety and Health and a widened scope of interventions and activities.

An adequate strategy for unions includes the following stages:

### **1. OSH profile**

- The point of departure is a comprehensive description of Legal OSH Framework, OSH Framework, Occupational accidents and diseases, OSH profile in key Economic Sectors, Conclusion and recommendations.

### **2. OSH strategy**

- Based on the OSH profile and the unions' capacity, a strategy is formulated and adopted. The strategy should include the following items; OSH policy for the union including vision and mission statement, a budget allocation for OSH activities and the establishment of an OSH Department or appointment of an OSH Resource Officer.

### 3. OSH interventions

- Research and documentation.
- Advocacy.
- Networking.
- Dissemination of information.
- Campaign.
- Training.
- Fundraising.

### 4. Evaluation and adjustment of policy and strategy

- A planned approach such as that outlined above is essential. In cases where the strategies and interventions are not based on a comprehensive description and analyses of the OSH problems *the intervention will be fragmented and the impact limited; furthermore, many donors will be reluctant to support unions lacking a proper foundation for their policies and strategies.*
- The need to adopt *and* implement an adequate strategy for addressing OSH problems is evident.

## Focus areas

OHSEI has identified the below-mentioned areas as future focus areas for fund raising.

Annual Theme Conference:

- An annual Theme Conference addressing actual issues related to Occupational Safety and Health, Environment, and Corporate Social Responsibility will be held.

Annual 'Train the Trainers' course:

- During the last two years, OHSEI has successfully conducted an exclusive two-week 'train the trainers' course for union officers in charge of Occupational Safety and Health. The course will endure provided that OHSEI can get funding.

OSH capacity building:

- There is an urgent need to strengthen the Unions' capacity for meeting and addressing request from their members in the field of OSH. The Unions should be able to safeguard the workers interests and have the capacity to participate in tri- and bipartite relations.

OSH training throughout Asia:

- OHSEI will carry out OHSE-training throughout Asia upon request and if sufficient funds from various stakeholders are available.

OSH training materials:

- OHSEI will continue to develop training materials upon request and sufficient fund from various stakeholders.

Corporate social responsibility and OSH audit:

- Corporate social responsibility and OSH-audits are a fast growing area, where OHSEI has the expertise and the possibilities for funding are promising. OHSEI will upgrade its skills in this field by developing a manual on how to carry out OSH-audits and train staff.

HIV/AIDS programmes:

- There is an increased acknowledgment of the fact that HIV/AIDS problems are most effectively addressed via a workplace approach. OHSEI has developed programmes relating to these issues and will promote them to potential donors.

Partnership:

- OHSEI has a strong role to play as Partner or sub-supplier to other organisations, which wish to set up programmes in the region and need access to well-established networks. Currently OHSEI has on-going discussions with several organisations and potential donors.

OSH and women / OSH and the Informal economy:

- OSH and women / OSH and the Informal economy are also expanding areas, where possibilities for funding are obvious.

## **Asbestos**

All construction, maintenance and cleaning workers are potentially at risk from exposure to asbestos.

There is no doubt that asbestos is one of the main killers in the working environment.

Therefore, there is a need for further studies and documentation and efforts should focus on how to ensure an effective ban on Asbestos and how the workers can protect themselves from the above threat.

### **OHSEI and Asbestos:**

As the International Unions' agency on Occupational Safety, Health and the Environment, OHSEI has a strong role to play in guiding the Trade Unions on how to deal with asbestos:

For OHSEI there are two issues that need to be addressed, i.e. how can the unions mobilize *a ban on asbestos* and how can the unions ensure that the workers *have been trained to work with asbestos safely*.

OHSEI will seek to:

- Screen the various unions in Asia's attempt to ban asbestos and display the outcome on the OHSEI website.
- Catalogue campaigns that have been successful.
- Prepare information material on safe work techniques dealing with asbestos.
- Prepare training programmes and manuals.

- Prepare guidelines for unions on how to carry out campaigns with the aim of informing the workers on risks and hazards while working with asbestos.