

Health and Safety Is Our Right! Joint BWI EFBWW Statement on International Workers Memorial Day

On 28 April worldwide the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) and the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) commemorate workers that have lost their lives to workplace accidents and disease and highlight our ongoing fight for health, safety and decent working conditions. In the build up to International Workers Memorial Day this year, we have a joint BWI/EFBWW campaign that demands occupational health and safety must be given the status of a fundamental right by the International Labour Organization (ILO), alongside the existing fundamental rights, which are freedom of association, collective bargaining and protection from discrimination, forced labour and child labour.

A landmark decision by the ILO Governing Body in March 2020 means that a recommendation for establishing OHS as a fundamental right is in the agreed roadmap for the 2022 International Labour Conference (ILC). Whilst this is a positive development, it is not a certainty that we will win our demand. Thus, BWI and EFBWW affiliates are mobilising affiliates to build a global alliance with employers, from workplaces to national industry associations, calling on the ILO to recognise OHS as a fundamental right.

Under the campaign, affiliates across the globe are negotiating with employer associations and companies in the construction, building, wood and forestry sectors to sign a declaration acknowledging that OHS should be a fundamental worker right. The campaign runs up to 1 June so that BWI and EFBWW can present the signed declarations to the ILC in 2021 as our contribution to have this proposal broadly supported and solidly on the ILC agenda for 2022.

Our struggle on OHS has the attention of the public and this opportunity has been created by the general awareness of the need to address COVID19 in workplaces. Trade unions have witnessed that COVID19 has been handled far better in companies where workers have access to rights on occupational health and safety and are involved in the OSH management. BWI and EFBWW assert that safe workplaces play a crucial role in suppressing the spread of the pandemic and we support the call for COVID-19 to be classified as an occupational disease. Where this has been achieved it has enhanced protection for workers and access to compensation funds for families of workers who die or are infected with Covid-19 at work.

It is important that trade union seize this important moment to establish in the minds of people that OHS is a specialised area of public health that governments must make explicit provision and to win healthy and safe workplaces as fundamental worker right at the ILO. This victory at the ILO is critical to determining the approach to global governance of occupational health and safety needed to improve the application of international occupational health and safety standards worldwide.

The growing awareness of the importance of OHS must be built on by unions that promote policies, at a national and regional level, so that countries put in place sustainable plans and systems that will respect, protect, fulfil and promote workers' rights to OHS as part of citizens' rights to a healthy environment. The declarations that have been signed so far, show that also on the employer's side this orientation is considered as reasonable.

We urge you to go out or go online this International Workers Memorial Day to amplify workers voices around the world on the call for healthy and safe workplaces for all.