

# Trade unions push for better health and safety at work

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The General Workers' Union organised a national conference on health and safety at the workplace in January 2008. The aim of this conference was to formulate concrete measures that would help to reduce the number of occupational accidents. The government and other organisations welcomed the trade union's initiative. Concurrently, the Union of United Workers launched its own health and safety campaign.

In January 2008, the General Workers' Union (GWU (<http://www.gwu.org.mt>)), Malta's largest trade union, organised a national conference on health and safety (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/health-and-safety>) at the workplace.

## General Workers' Union proposals

GWU highlighted the need to set up an independent committee consisting of representatives from employer organisations, trade unions and the Occupational Health and Safety Authority (OHSA (<http://www.ohsa.org.mt>)). The committee's objective would be to formulate a plan to implement an effective workplace health and safety strategy.

GWU also underlined the need for the government to ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO (<http://www.ilo.org>)) Convention No. 155 on occupational health and safety (<http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C155>). The GWU Secretary General, Tony Zarb, asserted that EU regulations on health and safety were insufficient and that Malta needs to adopt the ILO regulations. Furthermore, GWU added that health and safety training should not only be conducted at the workplace, but it should also form an integral part of the educational curriculum, thus preparing the future workforce for all eventualities.

The GWU spokesperson on health and safety suggested that all of the reports about occupational accidents should be made public in order to avoid future recurrences. The spokesperson also emphasised that all workers, irrespective of their legal status, should be given free access to both health and safety training and the necessary safety equipment for their work.

## Participants call for improved enforcement of regulations

The Minister of Social Policy, John Dalli, whose portfolio includes employment and industrial relations, stated that, while Malta adheres to EU occupational health and safety regulations,

there is still room for improvement. Minister Dalli emphasised the need for OHSA to continue strengthening its efforts and resources. As a result, throughout 2008, OHSA shall be implementing a number of measures sanctioning employers and workers who do not respect the current health and safety regulations at the workplace. Such measures will range from fines to jail sentences. Simultaneously, OHSA shall be hiring more labour inspectors in the areas of engineering and construction, thereby facilitating the enforcement process of health and safety regulations at workplaces in these economic sectors.

The Chief Executive Officer of OHSA, Mark Gauci, highlighted that, in the five years since OHSA has been set up, it has managed to curb the amount of occupational accidents in Malta (MT06090191 (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/undefined/latest-findings-on-accidents-at-work>)). Mr Gauci claimed that, in terms of work-related accidents per head of population, the amount of fatal and non-fatal accidents in Malta was below the EU average. He added that OHSA has put in place a set of 32 regulations in recent years and has started to disseminate information on health and safety issues in schools. On the other hand, the spokesperson for the parliamentary opposition claimed that the government had neither increased its budgetary allocation in the field of health and safety nor the number of labour inspectors.

The spokesperson for the Malta Employers' Association (MEA (<http://www.maltaemployers.com>)) stated that the employer organisation agrees with GWU's proposal to integrate health and safety in the educational curriculum. The Malta Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise (CoC (<http://www.chamber.org.mt>)) and the Malta Federation of Industry (FOI (<http://www.foi.org.mt/>)) both asserted that, while the legislation is in place, OHSA is lacking the necessary resources to fulfil its duties.

The Malta Chamber of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (GRTU (<http://www.targetltd.com/grtu>)) representative highlighted that one should also focus on other economic sectors, apart from building and construction, in which working conditions may not be causing an immediate health threat but may create serious health threats over a number of years. This position was also shared by GWU's President, Victor Carachi, who emphasised the relevance of stress at work as a health and safety issue.

## **Union of United Workers' campaign**

For its part, the Union of United Workers (Union Haddiema Maghqudin, UHM (<http://www.uhm.org.mt>)), Malta's second largest trade union, organised a campaign focusing mainly on the building and construction sector. UHM intensified its efforts to create a nationwide awareness campaign with the aim of achieving an improved implementation and enforcement of the relevant health and safety laws. During meetings with the government, UHM, like GWU, underlined the need that OHSA shall be given sufficient resources to carry out its duties properly.

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