

May Day, for today's martyrs

When work kills, death becomes a number and life becomes a sacrifice on the altar of capitalism and exploitation

Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici

27th April 2007

For capitalism, workers are nothing more than living numbers – production numbers, redundant numbers, mobile numbers, numbers to be cut down through job losses. And they are still just numbers even when they die at work. Exploited lives and broken lives are only a cost. A number. Now, Italy's national agency for insurance against workplace injuries, INAIL, has announced that in 2006 there were a total of 1,280 workplace deaths, with a sharp rise in the figures for women and non-EU citizens. These numbers tell us that in 2006 a total of 1,115 people died in the industrial sector (280 in construction alone), 114 in agriculture and 11 civil servants. The number of women dying at work has increased: 103 in 2006 as against 88 the previous year. And the numbers of non-EU citizens dying at work in Italy has also been increasing over the past 4 years.

Numbers. Statistics. The statistics tell us that on average 4 people die at work every day as a result of accidents, but they do not tell us about the deaths which go unreported because the workers involved, be they men or women, Italians or immigrants, are moonlighting in undeclared, illegal, clandestine jobs, part of the hidden economy. Or about the workers who are involved in road accidents because they are so tired due to driving or working long hours. Or the victims of exposure to carcinogens or toxic elements, whose illnesses are rarely – if ever – linked to their work.

When the culprit is work, a loophole in Article 2087 of the Civil Code or in Law 626 [1] can always be found to protect this serial killer. But it is plain for all to see: the culprit is the organization of labour and its de-regulation; the intensification of the exploitation of labour and blackmail on the part of those who would like the laws designed to protect workers' safety to be relaxed or repealed, even depenalised. This killer also maims: there are hundreds of thousands of workplace injuries every year (INAIL reported 938,613 in the year 2004).

In Italy, as in the rest of the world, behind these workplace deaths and accidents there lie greater interests which tend to dump the cost of the consequences of these deaths, injuries and work-related illnesses onto the collectivity. They are of course human costs, but also enormous economic costs: every year 4% of the world's GNP is lost due to costs deriving from accidents, deaths and illnesses linked to the workplace – a figure which is 20 times that of what is spent on development aid.

The human cost, however, is incalculable! It is a slaughter on a worldwide scale. The International Labour Organization (ILO) registered around 2.2 million work-related deaths for the year 2005, of which “only” 350,000 were the result of accidents (of these, as many as 60,000 were in the construction sector). All the others — that’s 1,700,000 people — were victims of work-related illnesses (asbestos alone still counts for about 100,000 deaths a year). And most of the mortal injuries estimated by the ILO occur in China (around 90,000), other Asian countries (76,866) and India (40,133). Over the next 15 years there will be an increase both in the number of young people (15–24) and older people (the over-60s) joining the workforce and it is these groups which tend to suffer the greatest incidence of workplace accidents.

Prevention, protection, safety and health in the workplace are costs which cannot be offloaded onto the national labour contracts for the various categories. They must be borne by employers. Workplace Safety Monitors must be introduced into every workplace — if necessary in an autonomous, self-managed way by the workers themselves. These Monitors must be protected and safeguarded from blackmail by the bosses and be in direct contact with local health officers. Local health officers must be charged with recognizing workplace injuries and work-related diseases and set up an observatory of workplace accidents which includes every local authority area and every workplace.

But above all we need to continue our criticism of capitalism as a system of production, and systematically denounce exploitation and its lethal effects on the health and lives of the proletariat of Italy and the whole world. We must organize specific struggles on the theme of safety in order to fight the various processes that lie at the root of the rise in risk factors — from privatization to outsourcing, from de-qualification of duties to increases in the workrates in production units.

If we are no longer to die from work, but live from it, heartfelt appeals and crocodile tears are not enough. Nor is hoping that rules and regulations are observed or that the bosses will act honestly. In every workplace we have to win back our dignity and the awareness that it is up to us to defend our rights. The workers themselves must struggle and be united in that struggle.

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