



ITUC – ITF – IUF statement on UNEA4 - March 5, 2019

Plastics and chemicals threaten food security, health and jobs of workers: Global Unions Call for Action

The fourth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-4) is taking place in Nairobi, Kenya, on the theme of “Innovative solutions for environmental challenges and sustainable consumption and production (SCP).” Preparations for the meeting run from 4 to 8 March, while the high-level segment will take place from 11 to 15 March 2019. UNEA is the world’s highest-level decision-making body on the environment; the Environment Assembly brings together governments, entrepreneurs, activists and others to share ideas and commit to action. Trade union representatives will be an important component of the civil society representation at the Assembly.

UNEA-4 has three areas of focus:

- tackling the environmental challenges related to poverty and natural resources management, including sustainable food systems, food security and halting biodiversity loss;
- introducing life-cycle approaches to resource efficiency, energy, chemicals and waste management; and
- ensuring sustainable business development at a time of rapid technological change.

Sustainability is an integrated concept. Trade unions advocate for sustainable ecosystems which can provide decent work within stable communities able to share prosperity with all. Trade unions also advocate recognition of the links between environmental protection and eradication of poverty, the development of green technologies which produce decent work and the promotion of gender equality, human rights and empowerment of women in environmental governance.

While all these areas are of major importance for a sustainable future, global unions wish to focus on the devastation caused to the environment and peoples’ livelihoods by plastic pollution in marine environments and the damage caused by exposure to hazardous substances and toxic wastes.

Marine litter and plastics pollution are threatening jobs, lives and livelihoods of workers

Oceans and seas are the workplaces for many millions of people. Plastics pollution threatens job security, food security and food safety on the whole planet. A substantial amount of global food is

derived from the fish and seafood sector and this food is becoming increasingly contaminated by microplastics. UN agencies tackling this threat to food security should include the ILO with its tripartite constituency of governments and employer and trade union organisations.

Global unions seek a legally binding agreement to strengthen global governance on marine plastic litter and microplastics.

Hazardous substances and toxic waste

Countries need to protect the environment and minimize the adverse impacts of hazardous substances on human health across their lifecycle. Stronger national laws within a global framework are urgently required. The legal framework must include prohibition and safe removal strategies for the most dangerous substances as well as strong worker and consumer protection laws which include the right to information on hazardous substances and wastes. States should ensure access to treatment and compensation for workers and other citizens who have become ill or disabled through exposure to hazardous substances

The global unions wish to draw attention to the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Toxics and in particular his report on protecting workers from toxic exposures which was presented to the Human Rights Council in 2018. The [report](#) offers 15 principles to help States, businesses and other actors realize everyone's right to safe and healthy working conditions.

Countries should also adopt and/or review and systematically update the Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers.

We call on countries to implement the existing Conventions on chemicals and waste and to constructively engage in the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) beyond 2020 process. We also call for the phasing-out of hazardous pesticides.

Need for urgent action

The international labour movement calls on all governments to recognise the scope of the problem and the need to develop and immediately start implementation of the plans of action to reduce and fully eliminate the pollution of the world's seas and oceans. We support the initiative to develop an internationally binding instrument to prevent plastic pollution and call on all governments to support such a binding instrument as a matter of urgency.

Transnational companies, in particular food, drink, fast food companies and retailers, must take immediate measures to remove and replace plastics in their packaging with recyclable alternatives and work with all their business partners through the entire supply chains to ensure that all packaging is developed with careful consideration of its environmental impact. It is not enough to declare that all plastic packaging and containers be recyclable by a certain date without investing in or participating in the provision of collection and recycling operations.

We believe that workers in commercial and small-scale seafood, fisheries and aquaculture are at the forefront of the problem and call on the governments at UNEA4 to respect Freedom of Association and

include trade unions and civil society groups in consultations on the issues, to ensure environment and human rights protection. In particular, we recall the recent [‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food’ for fishery workers](#).

We also call on the FAO, ILO and IMO to upscale their efforts in developing standards and regulations on the responsible use and exploitation of marine resources for the benefit of the people working in the sector, and the entire population, present and future generations.

For more information on the actions of the unions at UNEA4 you can contact our delegation:

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The ITUC represents 207 million workers in 163 countries and territories and has 331 national affiliates.



The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) is a democratic, affiliate led federation recognised as the world’s leading transport authority. We fight passionately to improve working lives, connecting trade unions from 147 countries that may otherwise be isolated and helping their members to secure rights, equality and justice. We are the voice for over 18 million members working men and women across the world.



The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is an international federation of trade unions representing workers employed in agriculture and plantations; the preparation and manufacture of food and beverages; hotels, restaurants and catering services; all stages of tobacco processing. The IUF is composed of 421 affiliated trade unions in 128 countries representing over 10 million workers.