

## What about the workers?

Climate change, air pollution, plastic pollution, environmental degradation and resource depletion are linked and having massive impact on the lives, health, safety and security of workers and their families across the world.

Poster on CC march carried by Michael O'Neill UCU: Environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening. I'd paraphrase that as:

*"Environmentalism without class struggle that includes justice for workers health and safety won't be Just Transition and won't be as effective."*

Workers are at the heart of the toxic soup of chemicals in which we live and work. Workers are the canaries in the system- they are exposed first, exposed most and usually protected least and consider last, if at all, and they are screaming for more protection from harm. And they are also key to solving these crises.

Before chemicals become a problem in the wider environment, they have exposed workers to genetic mutations, endocrine disruption, reproductive damage, cancer and harmful acute and chronic effects on every organ and system in the body.

Workers extract out of the ground the fossil fuels and all the minerals we use in everything, they transport, process, manufacture it into building materials, machinery, infrastructure, products from talcum powder to cladding, mobile phones, computers, furniture, clothing, food and its containers, electric vehicles and all the plastics we use once and throw away. Then workers use those products at work, run transport systems, health, social care and education and all the other services that make our lives work, and they handle all the waste generated.

Workers' health is massively affected by all this with millions made ill and dying worldwide from exposures to toxic chemicals mostly in the air, whether they work outside or inside.

Just for example, exposure levels for asbestos, dust/particulate matter and Nitrogen dioxide are all set at levels far less safe for workers than the general public. But all workplace chemical exposure levels are set at economic + technical levels not for workers' health or for the health of their sperm, eggs, or babies developing in women workers' bodies. They are mostly based on narrow data relating to young, fit white men which does not cover most of workforce.

Air pollution now correctly recognised as massive issue because of its public health effects, but it was always a huge occupational health crisis. In 2017, the Hazards Campaign working with Greener Jobs Alliance and Universities and Colleges Union set up TUCAN the Trade Union Clean Air Campaign to raise awareness and through training sessions develop action to reduce air pollution caused by external traffic sources and also created by the work itself, using existing laws on chemicals, trade union safety representatives rights and linking these with community and environmental actions, and climate change. UK trade unions signed up to a charter for action, and we developed training and checklists on using the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health, other health and safety law + safety reps rights and environmental standards to identify pollutants, workers most at risk and organise collective action. We and worked with Global Action Plan on monitoring workplaces for particulate matter PM 2.5 and Nitrogen dioxide showing some very high levels of worker exposure.

The air in all workplaces can be contaminated by substances in the fabric of the building and furniture and fittings, by the activities carried on in the workplace and by external traffic pollution plus that caused by workplaces own vehicles which will also impact on other workers and communities. Outdoor workers may be especially exposed to Nitrogen dioxide and PM 2.5s from vehicle exhaust and tyres and employers are responsible for risk assessments and devising safe systems of work.

Poly and per fluorinated substances PFAS are POPs, persistent organic pollutants, and called Forever Chemicals as they don't break down for many years and are poisoning water, take away food, and environments all over the world, yet workers are still exposed to these carcinogens in PPE and foam as firefighters and in making waterproof and non-stick products.

Plasticisers and phthalates are Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals, EDCs, and in all plastic products including thermal till receipts, pesticides, cosmetics and menstrual products and have harmful effects in parts per trillion.

Carcinogens like asbestos and Poly aromatic hydrocarbons, PAHs, silica in building materials and crumb rubber pitches, were manufactured into products and installed before they got into the environment and affected users and environment.

Pesticides such as glyphosate, neonicotinoids, organophosphates, are bad for our health when they get into food or air and for bees and other insects but the workers who made them and those who use them on crops and animals are exposed first and most and they can be carcinogenic, cause endocrine disruption, mutation and reproductive damage.

Even office air contains VOCs, volatile organic compounds from personal and cleaning products, formaldehyde off-gassing from MDF furniture and carpets, plastic fibres and particles from, flame retardants and stain resisters from carpets and upholstery, furniture and computers and external traffic pollution which becomes indoor air.

### All in a Days Work?

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Fvupn2Pe8Et2tgU32ukrox2\\_LEqBO7qY/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114641690907270459727&rtpof=true&sd=true](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Fvupn2Pe8Et2tgU32ukrox2_LEqBO7qY/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114641690907270459727&rtpof=true&sd=true)

TUCAN: <http://www.greenerjobsalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TUCAN-Guidance-for-TU-Reps.pdf>

The harms caused by work do not fall evenly across the workforce, but are concentrated on poorest and most insecure in UK and across the world. Generally the lower paid and more insecure you are, then the more likely to be injured, made ill or killed at work, and to live a shorter less healthy life than the richer and more secure. When sex, ethnicity + disability are added then work becomes even more toxic Covid pandemic has shown how while recorded deaths are highest amongst male workers, black and ethnic minority workers, women and black and ethnic minority workers are several times more likely to be killed and women and black people have suffered the hardest economic hit in UK and across the world. [Fair enough? We are all sickened by inequality at work - Hazards magazine](https://www.hazards.org/vulnerableworkers/ituc28april.htm) <https://www.hazards.org/vulnerableworkers/ituc28april.htm>

Lower paid workers + especially black and minority ethnic workers are more likely to travel to work and work in polluted air, for their children to go to school in more toxic air and to live near old contaminated land, and current polluting workplaces including incinerators, waste sites and busy roads. Air pollution is a class/workplace sex and gender, human rights and social justice issues, linked with climate change and all the other crises.

And so workers and trade unions are key to solving these issues and must be empowered and supported to create more decent jobs and decent lives for all, while reducing the toxic exposures, decarbonising their jobs in a just and more equal way. Just Transition must mean increasing justice and equality.

KEY POINTS: We need:

- **Enforceable rights for workers and trade unions especially safety reps to tackle toxic substances and all health and safety issues more effectively.** In UK health and safety system has been broken by years of neoliberal deregulation, political interference, corporate capture, slashed funding for enforcement and, attacks on workers and union rights. In many countries there are no or weak and unenforced health and safety laws. This allows capitalists to dump their toxic work that hurts and kills workers as Ram has explained in Asia and other countries and destroys environments on which people livelihoods depend making them more vulnerable to climate change and future pandemics. So we need to support and ensure that Occupational Safety and Health is made an ILO Fundamental Right at work  
[IT'S FUNDAMENTAL | Making work safety an ILO Fundamental Right at Work - Hazards magazine](https://www.hazards.org/wmd/fundamental.htm)  
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- **Toxic Use Reduction strategy and infrastructure of research and law as Andy Watterson has explained, must be sited at the heart of health and safety** with reinforced COSHH law and enforcement, and rights for safety reps to act on work and environmental issues.
- **Immediate Banning of the most toxic MERCs and persistent organic pollutants** like PFAS – forever chemicals as Ram has said, and sunseting of all toxic substances as soon as rapid toxic use reduction research and green chemistry find safer alternatives
- **Sex and gender based health and safety.** Issues that affect women at work are ignored, under researched and work is designed around men and masculine gender assumptions with consequent lack of action and prevention for women workers health and safety. Women are at risk because of biological differences plus a life time of hormonal changes and gendered stereotypes which put them at double, triple risk of toxic exposures. Health and safety and climate change transitional policies will not be just if they are sex and gender blind, they must be sex and gender sensitive and take account of effects on sperm, eggs and developing foetus at work  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1L2ib83r-1TpHdEeMnBsD8vAM-zUWi6RD/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114641690907270459727&rtpof=true&sd=true>
- **Life Cycle Analysis of all products, systems and chemicals from design to post use/disposal** so that 'regrettable substitution' can be avoided and so full effects on work, communities and environment are considered that we can have clean circular economies that use resources sustainably and safely reuse and recycle products and prevent hazardous waste

**Unions and communities, workers and people together in solidarity nationally and globally.**

We must demand safe work, products and services and system that are not harmful to workers' short of long term health, or their children and families, or the environment and decarbonise jobs in a way that increases justice and equality, get toxic substances out of our workplaces, out of products, our homes, or air, soil, water and out of our homes, our bodies and our lives!

Workers' rights and toxic exposures (HRC 2018) by Human Rights Special Rapporteur Baskut Tuncak:  
<http://www.srtoxics.org/resources/thematic-reports/workers-rights-and-toxic-exposures-hrc-2018/>

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