

Hacia un futuro sin tóxicos: Transición Justa

Reg Green:
Health, Safety and Environmental Affairs

International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine
and General Workers' Unions



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400 AFFILIATED UNIONS
110 COUNTRIES
20 MILLION WORKERS



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Is there such a thing as a non-toxic
chemical?



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- ◆ All chemicals have the potential to do harm to humans and the environment. In some instances the risks to humans and the environment depend as much on the dose and/or the circumstances of the exposure as on the intrinsic properties of the chemical. In other instances the intrinsic properties may render the chemical unacceptable regardless of conditions of use.



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Does this mean that the struggle for a
less toxic future is pointless?



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- ◆ No – there are a large number of chemicals that are intrinsically more hazardous than others - and still a huge number of chemicals used in the workplace for which little or no information exists.
- ◆ Even if perfect safety is a largely elusive goal – there is no reason to stop striving for constant improvements.



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- ◆ There are many examples of chemicals having been introduced on the grounds that they would ‘benefit humanity’ only to prove at a later stage that they are far less beneficial than at first thought. Examples of this include certain pesticides.



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- ◆ Even chemicals that are non-toxic to humans (e.g. chlorofluorocarbons – CFCs) have been found to be extremely damaging to the environment. No one reckoned on the fact that CFCs react in the upper atmosphere to destroy the earth's protective ozone layer.



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- ◆ It is precisely *because* of the struggle for a less toxic future that a number of chemicals (e.g. persistent organic pollutants – POPs and CFCs) are being eradicated – with clear benefits for humans and the environment.



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Is the use of toxic chemicals the price
that has to be paid for ‘progress’?



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- ◆ In general we should work on the basis that the answer has to be ‘no’. The challenge is to ensure that toxic chemicals are replaced wherever possible by benign or less toxic chemicals.



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- ◆ Chlorine is a toxic chemical but has undoubtedly been a major contributor in making drinking water much safer for people in many parts of the world.
- ◆ However, there is no reason to be complacent; the use of chlorine to render water safe for drinking does not mean that chlorine is necessarily acceptable in other uses or, indeed, that it will remain the best option for ensuring the safety of drinking water in the future.



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- ◆ There are many interpretations of ‘progress’. The economic progress of an individual or group of people may be at the expense of environmental damage or damage to the health and safety of another individual or group of persons.



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Is there such a thing as ‘acceptable
risk’?



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- ◆ There is no easy answer – what is acceptable to one person may not be acceptable to another. It also has to be remembered that risk assessment is more of an imperfect art than a perfect science
- ◆ One person's risk is often another person's benefit - there is a lot of commercial pressure to try to quantify 'acceptable risk' as opposed to dealing with the 'hazard'.

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- ◆ The people who generally define the ‘acceptability’ of a risk are usually not those who are most likely to be exposed *to* the risk (obvious exceptions are individual instances of risk-taking such as smoking and alcohol use)
- ◆ All human beings take risks on a daily basis (crossing the street, driving a car, eating a poor diet, engaging in dangerous sports, etc.). If risk-taking were not part of the human condition, it is difficult to see how progress could ever have been made.

But...



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- ◆ An individual's decision to take a risk is not the same as having that risk forced upon him or her by someone else.



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Should there be a ‘no compromise’
approach when it comes to health,
safety and environmental protection?



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- ◆ There are some who insist that health, safety and environmental protection are ‘not negotiable’. Whilst this makes a very good ‘sound bite’, it is important to recognise the limits of such a position in practice:



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- ◆ It will always be possible to improve health, safety and environmental performance and protection, but this will often mean that the resources needed will have to be found at the cost of some other activity;
- ◆ This inevitably means that stakeholders have to engage in a process of priority setting;



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- ◆ Priority setting can take a number of forms:
 - It can involve tackling immediately those things that are easy to achieve at reasonable cost and with obvious benefit.
 - It can also involve tackling the more urgent issues – despite the difficulty or cost in doing so – where the risks are generally agreed to be unacceptable;



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- ◆ Priority setting and the subsequent decision-making are, ‘par excellence’ issues which will be subject to negotiation and agreement – and trade unions are based on the principle of negotiation.



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- ◆ However, the *nature* of the negotiation is of crucial importance. If it excludes or minimises the involvement of those directly affected by the priority-setting and decision-making, then it will not be seen as credible and is likely to be resisted.
- ◆ Unions need to be especially careful that they are not called upon to ‘defend the indefensible’ by unscrupulous employers threatening that any change will cost jobs.



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Many workers earn their livings by producing or using toxic chemicals. How can they be expected to jeopardise their livelihoods by opposing the production of such chemicals?



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- ◆ The goal should not be safe(r) products or jobs. It should be safe(r) products and jobs.
- ◆ Making necessary, non-toxic, products will still require the creation and maintenance of jobs - and those companies that lead the way are more likely to create long-term sustainable jobs.



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- ◆ There are also major life-cycle issues to be considered.
- ◆ It is of little use to produce a chemical in conditions of relative safety only to have it used by workers with little or no knowledge, understanding or capacity to use it safely.



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How does a toxic chemicals reduction and minimisation strategy fit into the concept of sustainable development?



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- ◆ Sustainable development is *more of a process than a goal*. History teaches that whilst progress can be made, new challenges are always likely to be with us.
- ◆ Human beings do not have perfect knowledge and cannot therefore be expected to create perfect solutions. As some have put it rather more cynically; there is a new problem for every solution!



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- ◆ Sustainable development is about reconciling three basic elements: the economic, the social and the environmental. Unless these are in balanced equilibrium, any ‘development’ will be unstable at best and unsustainable in the longer term.



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- ◆ The move from toxic to less- or non-toxic products and processes will involve balancing employment, environment and economic criteria. For this reason, unions within the chemical sector have to take sustainability very seriously.



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How can, and should, unions react to the demands for an end to toxic chemical production and use?



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- Recognise that today's reality is not yesterday's reality - nor will it be tomorrow's.
- Understand that many of yesterday's practices are no longer acceptable today; equally, many of today's practices will not be acceptable in the future.
- Accept that the most polluting, most dangerous and most resource intensive companies are increasingly those with their best days behind them.



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This in turn requires that unions:



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- ◆ Understand that any process of change has the potential to create winners as well as losers
- ◆ Recognise that the more planned the change, the more likely it will be that the interests of the ‘losers’ will be properly taken into consideration
- ◆ Accept that some processes and or products *do need to be dealt with using radical measures* (e.g. banning, such as chlorofluorocarbons – CFCs, POPs, asbestos, etc.)

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- ◆ ‘...careful assessment of the full effects of a policy proposal must included estimates of its economic, environmental and social impacts inside and outside the EU...*It is particularly important to identify clearly the groups who bear the burden of change so that policy makers can judge the need for measures to help these groups adapt.*’ (emphasis added)

(EC Communication ‘A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development’)



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What are the principles involved in the trade union ‘just transition’ demand?



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- ◆ Production, consumption and end-of-life standards have to be dramatically improved if human activities are to become sustainable. There is no future in unions ‘defending the indefensible’.
- ◆ There will be costs and benefits involved in making the necessary changes and these need to be shared equitably if they are to be supported by the various stakeholders.



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- ◆ The necessary changes are most likely to happen - and will happen soonest - where the interests and concerns of those most directly affected are most comprehensively addressed.
- ◆ Workers in the most resource-intensive, polluting and dangerous sectors will, inevitably, be hit soonest and hardest by the necessary changes.



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What does this mean for for trade
unions?



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- ◆ Unions need constantly to develop and refine their understanding of the concept of sustainability – in particular, the links between its social, economic and environmental aspects.
- ◆ Unions in the resource-intensive and otherwise environmentally sensitive sectors – such as the chemical sector - need to be especially engaged in promoting more sustainable production and consumption patterns.



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- ◆ Support for ‘just transition’ cannot be taken for granted; it needs to be well presented by unions, and unions need to have a clear understanding of how it could work in practice or they will find it impossible to convince either their members or other stakeholders.



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One of the most ‘just’ strategies is for workers, their unions and the companies that employ them to develop joint approaches to address health, safety and environmental challenges *in ways that also secure sustainable employment*. There are a number of reasons for this strategy:



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- ◆ Such joint approaches would involve those most directly affected - and those with the biggest interest in identifying sustainable solutions.
- ◆ The process can provide all parties with the opportunity to really learn what the issues are, how they may be tackled and what the constraints and opportunities are.



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- ◆ As sustainability is more a process than a goal such a joint approach provides the formal mechanisms and opportunities for continuous progress and monitoring.
- ◆ Where compromises are necessary, there will be a greater acceptance of decisions taken if they are taken jointly.



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In conclusion



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- ◆ Chemical safety must be based on continuous improvement
- ◆ Some aspects of chemical safety are more pressing than others
- ◆ Establishing priorities is a matter for discussion, negotiation and, occasionally, compromise



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- ◆ Unless priority-setting and decision-making fully involve workers and their unions, they will lack credibility and broad support
- ◆ Future economic, social and environmental sustainability will depend on major changes in industrial processes and products



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- ◆ There is no medium- to long term benefit in unions attempting to defend the indefensible. Denying reality can mean that change, when it finally comes, hits workers much much harder.
- ◆ Protecting future sustainable employment rather than specific jobs should be a major concern of any ‘just transition’ policy

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- ◆ Where jobs *are* lost, unions need to develop ‘just transition’ policies that help displaced workers to find new employment – including additional training and retraining, relocation grants, early retirement packages, etc.
- ◆ ‘Just transition’ policies should not be *separate from* but should be an *integrated part* of a union’s negotiating strategy. *There is no material difference between a worker losing his/her job for ‘environmental’ or for ‘economic’ reasons.*



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Gracias !