



WORKERS' PARTICIPATION ON OSH AT THE WORKPLACE

ILO standards in the field of occupational safety and health (OSH) emphasize the importance of workers' role in the design and implementation of policies and preventive programmes at the national and enterprise levels. At the workplace level, workers' participation has been identified as a key precondition of successful OSH management, and a major contributing factor in the reduction of occupational diseases and injuries. In fact, workers are an important source of OSH information. They have first-hand knowledge of problems with work practices and procedures and can provide valuable advice about risks and possible solutions. They can offer their knowledge on faults with machinery, plants, or furniture; difficulties caused by the design and/or layout of work equipment; type, frequency and seriousness of incidents or near-misses occurring; and on the impact of OSH management programmes.

The [Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 \(No. 155\)](#) and its [Recommendation \(No. 164\)](#) provide for workers' participation in the implementation of preventive and control measures in the enterprise. They stipulate that cooperation between employers, workers, and their representatives is an essential element for managing OSH measures; and define the requirements and arrangements for workers and their

representatives to cooperate with employers in the fulfilment of their obligations on OSH.

According to these Standards, the main rights of workers and their representatives in relation to OSH include:

- Consultation and participation in joint OSH committees for the implementation of relevant measures, concerning the working environment, working conditions, work content and work organization;
- Access to information and training on hazards and risks associated with their work and the measures to prevent them;
- Withdrawal from work when there is an imminent and serious danger to their health and life;
- Protection against victimization and undue consequences, such as dismissal and other measures prejudicial to them, while exercising their functions as workers' representatives on OSH, or as members of joint OSH committees.

The main responsibilities of workers and their representatives in relation with OSH include:

- Follow safety and health instructions and procedures, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE);



- Take reasonable care for their own safety and that of other persons who may be affected by their acts or omissions at work;
- Participate in safety and health training and awareness-raising activities;
- Cooperate with their employer on the implementation of OSH measures;
- Report any accident or injury in the course of or in connection with work;
- Report to their direct supervisor any situation which they have reason to believe could present a danger and which they cannot themselves correct;
- Inform supervisors if they withdraw from an imminent and serious danger, and the reasons for it.

Recommendation No. 164 explains in further detail the preventive measures that employers should implement and the functions of workers' safety and health representatives, and joint OSH committees where workers and employers are equally represented on a bipartite basis.

THE ROLE OF WORKERS' SAFETY AND HEALTH REPRESENTATIVES

Workers' safety and health representatives (OSH representatives) have a mandate to represent workers' interests in OSH matters in the workplace.

One of the most important roles of OSH representatives is participating in joint OSH

committees. They are used as a discussion forum and bipartite advisory body for the enterprise's decisions concerning OSH. It allows workers and employer's representatives to meet and cooperate to improve OSH conditions and to safeguard workers' physical and mental health.

OSH representatives should be elected freely by their co-workers through a direct and secret vote, in accordance with national law, regulations, and practice. The procedural aspects of the election should be clearly established at the workplace, and followed so as to ensure an effective exercise of this right. Whenever there is a trade union at the workplace, members of the trade union can be elected as OSH representatives. As the size, number of workers, type of activity and characteristics of workplaces may vary, there may be one or more OSH representatives or it may be necessary to establish more than one joint OSH committee per workplace. Some legislation provides for the number of OSH representatives and of joint OSH committees according to such parameters.

In the pursuit of promoting a preventive safety culture in the workplace, OSH representatives have to perform the following functions:

Consulting with employers

OSH representatives should be consulted when planning and developing OSH management systems, drafting an OSH policy, undertaking risk assessment and adopting preventive and protective measures, organizing workers' training, etc. Employers must also consult OSH representatives



in planning alterations processes, work content or work organization, which may have safety or health implications for workers; for example when introducing new technologies or changing of working methods, etc.

■ **Collecting and disseminating health and safety information**

To be involved and participate actively, workers need to be provided with appropriate information and training. Employers should also inform workers on designed OSH policies and procedures, on the results of risk assessment and control measures in place, changes in work environment, equipment, systems of work or substances used for work, etc. This information can be shared through the OSH representatives or the joint OSH committee. OSH representatives can also obtain information through their external sources.

■ **Communicating with workers**

Communication between workers and OSH representatives is a key element to ensure workers involvement, support, cooperation and the dissemination of information. OSH representatives should maintain a close interaction with all workers in order to achieve true participation on OSH within the enterprise. For this reason, they have the right to communicate with other workers on safety and health matters during working hours in the workplace. It is important that OSH representatives hold regular meetings with workers to keep them informed and take time to talk with them individually if necessary,

asking about health effects and any risks that they consider important, consulting on priorities and strategies, etc.

■ **Carrying out workplace inspections (walk-through surveys) on a regular basis**

Regular site inspections are one of the most common duties of the OSH representatives and joint OSH committees. Walk-through surveys should be considered as an early warning tool. Workplace inspections are undertaken so that housekeeping, fire safety and working practices can be checked, ensuring any deficiencies can be spotted quickly. To perform this task, OSH representatives must have access to all parts of the workplace.

■ **Identifying hazards and managing risks**

Whilst it is the employer's responsibility to carry out risk assessments and monitor the working environment, it is critical to involve workers' OSH representatives in the process. The risks and hazards identified through walk-through surveys should be communicated to management, and OSH representatives should participate in establishing the measures and procedures to eliminate or minimize the risks.

■ **Proposing and negotiating preventive measures**

OSH representatives contribute to negotiations with the employer on OSH matters and to the decision-making process, formulating proposals and initiatives aimed at preventing accidents and diseases and protecting the health and physical integrity of workers.



❶ **Ensuring that the employer is complying with health and safety requirements**

OSH representatives have the right to report to the competent authorities when they consider that the prevention and protection measures adopted by the employer, as well as the means to implement them, are not complying with the law or are not suitable to guarantee workers' health and safety.

❷ **Investigating accidents, occupational diseases and near misses**

Examining the causes of accidents, diseases and dangerous occurrences is a crucial activity where OSH representatives can play an important role. Through investigations, lessons can be learned and appropriate solutions put in place to prevent recurrences.

❸ **Collaborating with inspectors**

OSH representatives participate in the inspection visits and investigations of the competent authorities, formulating comments and observations.

To do their job effectively, OSH representatives need:

❹ **Access to information and training**

It is essential that OSH representatives have the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their function effectively. They should be given information on all relevant issues related to health and safety and should be appropriately trained. OSH representatives have the possibility to contact labour inspectors or have recourse to specialists to advise on particular safety and health problems.

❺ **Resources and time**

To perform their duties, OSH representatives must have reasonable time during paid working hours to carry out their safety and health functions. They could also be provided by the enterprise with suitable facilities and resources that enable them to successfully perform their functions.

TO LEARN MORE

🔍 [ETUC – “Safety Reps” Project - Health, Safety and Risk Prevention: towards better information, consultation and participation of workers within companies](#)

🔍 [ETUC – Health, Safety and Risk Prevention Improving information, consultation and participation in enterprises](#)