

Railway Safety

Statement from the ITF Railway Workers' Section

Draft document as of 1st August 2017

Although railways are considered to be one of the safest modes of transport, accidents happen. Given the nature of railways, accidents have a great damage potential deeply effective our members and the general public.

The ITF Railway Workers' section issues the following statement, based on a survey of affiliated unions, discussions at the ITF railway section conference in Toronto in November 2012, and the decision of the section steering committee meeting held in Brussels in July 2013. Railway safety is a complex issue. This statement draws up headlines. The details much be considered in each individual country.

Why safety is important

Railway safety has always been an important priority for the ITF railway section. For years the slogan for the ITF railway section action day has been "Safety First". This is about keeping the railways as a safe workplace for our members and other workers employed close to the railway industry, but also about safety for passengers and the public in general. Railway is one of the safest modes of transport, but if not managed properly, there is also a huge potential for damage. The development of railways is dependent on this high safety level.

The role of unions in guaranteeing safety

The railway workers' trade unions are the strongest guarantee for upholding and developing a high level of railway safety. In this work we should seek alliances with other positive forces in civil society, for instance political parties sympathetic to the situation in the railway sector, and passenger organisations.

The trade unions must play an active role in maintaining and improving the operational safety levels. There is no doubt that the legal responsibility for safety lies with the railway company, the employer. The unions, however, have the responsibility to strongly represent the interest of their members in this issue.

The collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) must have strong safety related provisions for issues like working time regulations, professional training, working place standards and procedures for active participation in the safety work of the company.

Health and safety issues must be an integrated part of the trade union work as a whole and have a very high attention from the trade union leadership.

The human factor

The workers operating the railway system must be able to do this in a safe way.

The training must be thorough, with enough time to learn both theory and practice. It is especially important to allow newcomers to the industry time to gain a certain level of practical experience before they are given full responsibility for safety related tasks. Workers must be allowed to fully learn and understand new technology. Introduction of new technology in general requires higher

and more advanced levels of training. Training and competence should be proved by official certification systems.

Social conditions, especially working time legal regulations and Collective Bargaining Agreements are very important standards. For workers to stay vigilant, the length of day and night shifts must be properly regulated, driving time must be limited, and the lengths of breaks and daily rest must be guaranteed. At the same time good regulations are of little value if they are not implemented. Far too often we see employers putting pressure on the workers to work overtime and to bend the regulations when there are train delays. Safety must come before being on time. Safety cannot be compromised even when it comes to prestige high speed trains, any small technical defect or human error can lead to massive casualties.

The working environment, like noise levels, temperature at the work site and ergonomics have heavy impact of the performance of the workers on safety related tasks. New technology should be used to steadily improve these standards.

Aggression against workers from passengers and others is also a big threat to railway safety. Special programs should be set up to deal with this issue.

The right of each individual worker to refuse to carry out dangerous work is enshrined in ILO convention 155, Article 13:

“A worker who has removed himself from a work situation which he has reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to his life or health shall be protected from undue consequences in accordance with national conditions and practice”.

Sixty countries ratified this convention and this right is implemented in national labor protection laws. This right is fundamental to railway workers. If a situation is considered as potentially dangerous, the work (trains) should be stopped without the workers being disciplined. On the contrary, they should be rewarded. Even if this specific ILO convention is not ratified, it sets an international standard for workers worldwide and should be respected.

The design of the safety systems

As with every profession, even the best-trained railway worker can make mistakes. Technical systems should be designed so that they constitute a barrier to human-error. The principle must be that no single human error is allowed to cause an accident. The higher the traffic density and speed of the train is, the more advanced the technical support systems must be. The ‘dead man’s handle’ onboard the locomotive, stopping the train if the driver becomes incapacitated, is well known. In a modern environment this must be supplemented with automatic train protection systems, including speed control preventing the train from passing warning signals and from dangerous speeding.

It is important to underline that more advanced technical barrier systems does not imply that the training levels can be reduced. On the contrary, in general the training needs to change focus and be improved.

The train networks are growing and becoming more complex, but the ideas of restructuring in many cases mostly imply cost savings introducing single driver operations, stations job cuts and outsourcing certain services to non-professional staff.

Proper maintenance of the infrastructure is equally important to ensure safety but far too often we see staff reductions, lengthening of the intervals between inspections and introduction of automated inspection systems with poorer quality as a substitute to proper inspections carried out by trained employees, -in order to save money. It is important that trade unions put pressure on politicians, decision-makers and budget holders who can grant money for new safety- related investments in the infrastructure.

Special attention must be given to level crossings. A collision between a train and another vehicle, for instance, usually has fatal consequences. All level crossings where there is potential for collisions should be equipped with automatic barriers and other preventive equipment, stopping road vehicles from crossing the track when a train is approaching. At a certain speed level, level crossings should not be allowed.

How railway safety can be maintained and improved

Railway companies should establish safety managements systems describing how the safety work is carried out in a systematic way. Involvement of workers and unions is an important part of a safety management system. Safety management systems should be open and transparent.

Railway safety is about technical equipment and its interaction with human beings. Every change that is done on the technical side or in the organization of work or companies, should improve safety. This should be proved by risk assessments from case to case in which the unions should be involved. Risk assessments should be transparent and the trade unions should have the right to consult independent experts at the cost of the companies.

An open and transparent system for recording incidents that could lead to potential dangerous situations, must be established. The participation of workers and unions in this is crucial. The system must reward individuals to report situations, even if the individual reporting is involved in the situation. Whistle-blowers exposing problems and expressing safety concerns must not be punished for their actions. Workers are on the ground and they are the first to see problems.

It is important that independent safety authorities are established. They must be independent from infrastructure managers and railway companies and be responsible for approval of the safety management systems of the companies, carry out inspections to monitor that the day to day operations are done in a safe way and have the authority to stop the railway operations in the case of serious safety breaches. There should be established special links from the unions to the safety authorities to express safety concerns. Safety authorities should not be given tasks of pursuing open market conditions. This shifts the focus away from safety. Safety authorities must publish the results of compliance audits.

In some countries, trade unions have taken the initiative to establish safety committees, in many cases jointly with management, at company level to discuss safety matters and in this way try to establish a common understanding with the management on how to deal with safety related issues.

In case of accidents

Every country should have an independent accident investigation body. It is especially important that it is independent from the criminal investigation system. The accident investigation body should also investigate incidents that might lead to serious accidents. The investigation should find the root cause of the accident and go beyond mistakes made by individuals. The important thing is to identify why the accident was allowed to happen and why it was not prevented. This is about establishing a just and fair culture, not a blame culture. The purpose is to avoid future accidents.

The trade unions should be involved in the accident investigation and should have unlimited access to the results and details of the investigation.

The ITF also strongly oppose what can be described as a “my hands are clean” culture. Far too often managements excuse themselves with that everything has been done “according to the book”. But that an accident happens, is in itself a proof that this was not good enough.

Safety vs profits

Neo-liberal policies is a huge hindrance to the development of a sound safety culture. Safety costs money. When the hunt for profit is the main driving force behind the running of a railway company, the workers and the users of the railway face several challenges in keeping safe. Understaffing, widespread use of part-time workers, reduced time for training and increased stress at work are all problems trade unions have to deal with.

The structural changes within the railways are also problematic for railway safety. The splitting up of companies and the widespread use of outsourcing and workforce agencies makes the line of responsibility for safety related matters unclear. Experience and training levels are often low, since many of these companies performing railway services often have their main operations in other sectors. Railway companies operates with own specially designed safety procedures, which can lead to misunderstandings and confusion among workers shifting jobs.

The international trade union cooperation for railway safety must be stronger

International cooperation between the railway workers’ unions is becoming more and more important. The liberalization and privatization policies pursued by many governments are general global trends. They learn from each other and import solutions. The trade unions do the same thing, but the cooperation must be even stronger on our side. We have the tools, the national trade unions, the regional cooperation and the railway section of the ITF.

Trade union solidarity for a safe railway system!